PENGUIN CLASSICS

ACT_NATURALLY

With a Resolute Heart

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by Act_Naturally

Summary

What if Triwizard Tournament, but Hunger Games?

Centuries ago, instead of hiding from muggles with the Statute of Secrecy, wizards used a ritual to create a dimension for all magical beings to live openly. But maintaining that freedom comes at a lethal price. Every seven years, the worthiest students in Europe have the great honour of being selected to compete in a tournament: three deadly tasks, two months of training, one victor. Grindelwald's Ministry demands it. But certain troublesome students only follow rules which happen to align with their own plans.

Tom Riddle intends to win. Harry Potter refuses to lose. From rivalry comes respect, and an intense interest that, once sparked, refuses to burn out. They are binary stars locked in orbit in a world built to break them apart. But the world doesn't define them, their choices do: what they decide to fight for, and who they choose to trust. If they get those right, they might be able to define the world.

Notes

So this is what I've been doing for the last few years. It is probably the best thing I've ever written. I have ~200 000 words and it'd say it's about 90% complete. That said, I'm flat out doing a PhD and don't know when I'll finish either endeavour. I'm editing as I go and there are still some holes to patch, so updates will be as regular as I can manage but may not be regular by any other metric.
About the universe this is set in: I cherry picked elements from both Harry Potter and Hunger Games. It's mostly Harry Potter, but very different to canon. I re-designed the Tournament to be more like the Hunger Games, framed it in HP politics so it's more about blood status than districts, then altered the HP universe to a point where they'd accept a child murder sport. E.g. they have a dictator, but the dystopia isn't as full-on as HG. I also looked at other things a murder-sport-approving society might do, like steal muggleborn children from their parents. It's fun.

It might end up rated M for murder, will depends how graphic it gets.

Important: Character ages are all out of whack. Some people that should be dead are alive, and vice versa. Just don't go in expecting it to be canon and you'll figure it out as we go.

See the end of the work for more notes

Welcome to Hogwarts. Forecast: murder

“Congratulations first-year students on your new Houses, and welcome to Hogwarts,” Professor Dumbledore says. “To our familiar faces, welcome back. We have much to discuss and you won’t hear a word of it until your stomachs are full, so tuck in!”

Hushed whispers fill the Great Hall. Just as they’d filled the train, and Platform 9¾, and Diagon Alley. It’s more confronting, now, with the professors sitting above them looking downright grim.

Harry shovels food onto his plate by rote, and then he stares at it, trying to pick somewhere to start. He doesn’t feel like eating anything. He isn’t alone; even Ron is herding peas around his plate. On his other side, Hermione chews mechanically and stares into the middle distance, the way she usually only gets in exam week.

“Hey, Harry, do you think you’ll be the chosen one?”

There’s a shriek of a fork and a pea shoots across the table. “Shut up, Colin,” Ron snaps.

Colin shuts up.

Around the table, eyes that’d darted to Harry slowly return to their plates. Silence again. Thicker, this time.

The meal drags on.

“Now, for the announcements. Your Head Girl this year is Penelope Clearwater and the Head Boy is Tom Riddle. Seek them out for guidance. This will be a difficult year for all of you. Support, leadership, and the strength we gain from one another will be essential. Be good to each other. Enjoy the moments you share; they are precious. On that note, the Quidditch cup is cancelled, for Hogwarts is to host a tournament of a different sort. This year will feature the septennial Blood Games.”

It is a rare event when Dumbledore is serious, and when he is, he’s calm. This is different. There’s something angry flicking deep down. It’s frightening. Harry only vaguely remembers the last Games. He was nine and too young to really understand what was happening, but he remembers how it upset the indomitable adults around him. It was the first time he saw Uncle Sirius cry.

“The school will be closed to all except champions, mentors and training staff from November to January. For the duration, students and staff will continue classes in our neighbouring Beauxbatons Academy. In November we will also welcome temporary members of staff to fill the roles of our esteemed Professors McGonagall, Flitwick and Snape, who will once again reprise their role as mentors.”

“I found the silver lining,” Ron mutters.

“You’re not even taking potions this year,” Hermione rolls her eyes.

“Still.”

“Pay attention!”

But Dumbledore’s usual warnings about the caretaker’s least favourite prank products don’t hold the same weight, after that.

The walk to the dormitories carries the same dark cloud. The stairs don’t sneak out from under their feet. The more excitable portraits don’t cheer and follow along. The candles don’t shine as bright. The armour doesn’t stand as straight.

“It’s not right,” Harry scowls. “Holding the Games here. Hogwarts is–” sanctuary–freedom–wonder– “it’s home.”

The feeling of wrongness is so deep, Harry can’t put it in words. Hermione can.

“The perversion of promoting murder under the veil of honourable sacrifice, while trivialising it for entertainment; focusing prejudice and taking power from the weak to concentrate it in the wealthy, for the Ministry, no less; in a historic school, built for learning, to welcome everyone – it’s a betrayal of all Hogwarts stands for.”

“Sshhh!” Neville hisses, glancing around. “Not near the portraits, for Merlin’s sake. They’re listening.”

Neville is nervous more often than not, but in this instance, everyone else is too. It gives Harry pause, but he’s too angry to accommodate their fear for long. They don’t understand, they have other homes, but Harry has lost two already. Hogwarts is the only home he knows that is still going to be there year after year. As for Hermione, the muggleborn orphanages will never come close.

Harry opens his mouth, but Neville cuts him off. “Bad things happen

to people who criticise the Games."

Harry's heard the rumours, but he hadn't given them much weight. He'd felt like the Ministry was a world away and nothing could touch him at Hogwarts. These Games prove they can.

After they reach the tower and mutter "good night", Harry crawls into his fourposter and squeezes his eyes shut until he sees stars. He just wants to sleep, like it will reset the day and things will be back to normal tomorrow.

…

Well, one thing is back to normal. Harry can always rely on Malfoy to be an unmitigated arse.

"Hey, Potter!"

Ron takes a deep breath. Harry slides a hand in his pocket, around his wand.

"I've been waiting for this for six years, Potter."

"What? For them to cancel Quidditch so you can finally say I didn't beat you?" Harry says.

Ron snorts.

Malfoy glares. "I don't know if I'd prefer you to get selected or not. On one hand, I get to watch you die. On the other, I get to watch your friends die, and you cry over it, while you're forced to realise that you're not the most worthy Gryffindor; not even the best of a bad bunch."

"Only planning on watching, then? All cocky because your name isn't in the running. Daddy wouldn't risk his only son unless he thought you could win, and Slytherin elects their best shot. Shows what they think of you, doesn't it?"

"Why you little –"

"Detention, Potter, Weasley. Fighting before classes start – that's early, even for you," Professor Snape strides over, looking down his nose. The aforementioned appendage must be so big it's blocking how Malfoy also has his wand out. "Go."

Harry and Ron don't waste time getting away.

Harry is slow to stow his wand. He wouldn't put it past Malfoy to hex them in the back. "Detention. Great. Snape could've at least waited until we'd jinxed the prat. Then it'd be worth it."

"Bloody Malfoy. I'll turn him into a ferret one day, just watch," Ron mutters.

"You're not the best with human transfiguration, mate."

"Exactly. Who knows how he'd turn out?" Ron grins. Harry sniggers, and encouraged, Ron carries on, "Will he have a beak? Five legs? Be permanently bald? Place your bets."

"Can they turn him back? Will he ever be the same? Will it be an improvement?"

"I screw up his vocal cords enough and I reckon that's a definite improvement," Ron says, stepping over the bench at the Gryffindor table. Luckily, there's still some lunch left. They'd both slept through breakfast.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione rises from behind a huge tome, evidently the spoils of her quick dash to 'just look something up'. Never mind that classes don't even start until tomorrow.

"Malfoy. He's turned over a new leaf this year, and Snape too. It's all kittens and cuddles from the both of them."

Hermione frowns. "Must be something in the dungeon air. Parkinson's that way, too. We had a very charming conversation about the current fashion for funeral-wear."

"Even the less smug Slytherins are ticking me off," Harry mutters. "Why shouldn't they have to fret like the rest of us?"

"They're the House of ambition; there's always someone willing to volunteer," Hermione says. "And, of course, a lot of purebloods think they're a better judge of worth than a magical artefact."

Harry says, "Well sure, since they measure worth differently. Like how much gold is in your second-best drawing room. But, artefact?"

"Bill said a magic cup selects the names. It's supposed to be impartial," Ron says.

Hermione scrunches her nose and Harry can practically hear her

thinking ‘magic cup, honestly Ronald’.

“The *Goblet* of *Fire* picks from the names entered into it. But the judges enter the names, and if enough students and gold back a volunteer, they’ll only enter one name.”

“So – rich, popular, terrifying. I think we know who the female Slytherin champion is,” Harry says.

They look over at the green table and shudder. “Yeah.”

“And the bloke – Nott or Selwyn?” Ron suggests.

Harry hums, “Maybe Montague? Warrington?”

“Nah, Montague is a duffer and the only magical stick Warrington can use is a broom.”

“It will be Riddle,” Hermione says, definitively.

Ron scoffs. “No, it won’t. There's never been a muggleborn Slytherin champion, it'd take a coup to pull that off.”

Harry nods. “Not rich in money or family clout or anything else. He’s missing half his worthiness, right there.”

“And he’s well respected in Slytherin, despite that. He only needs to convince his House, not the judges,” Hermione says. “Slytherin hold a vote and a duelling competition, which Riddle will win for certain. He set records in half his OWLs.”

“OWLs don’t necessarily mean he’s a good fighter. Casting in a classroom isn’t like casting in a duel,” Harry says, reasonably. “Does Riddle even want to compete?”

“Oh, yes. We spoke about it over the summer break. He believes he can sway the vote,” Hermione answers.

Ron shakes his head.

Harry finds himself agreeing. The Slytherins are too narrow-minded.

Ron says, “I don’t buy it. Slytherin want to pick a victor. Everyone knows the Games are rigged to favour purebloods. Riddle would have to be ten times as powerful as the next best pureblood just to break even. Sure, he’s Head Boy and aced his exams, but is he on Dumbledore’s league in terms of intelligence and power?”

Even Hermione looks a bit sceptical now. She knows better than to bet against Ron when he talks strategy. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Who will the champions be? It’s the question that dominates the Great Hall. And the hallways. And most of the classrooms. Only McGonagall and Snape are intimidating enough to win total silence, and even then, Harry can still feel eyes on his back.

Hermione gets even more looks. Lavender’s face twists through a grateful-guilty-sad cycle every time they’re in the same room, because she’s sure Hermione is higher on the list and that means Lavender is safe. Hermione, Angelina Johnson and Ginny are the most capable Gryffindor girls in their respective years, but Hermione’s grades put her a step above the rest, and she’s not just book-smart, either; Malfoy can attest to that. Harry is worried about her. Very worried.

Katie is halfblood and Ginny is pureblood; they’d just be competing against other champions, not the gamemakers as well. Hermione is in the same boat as Tom Riddle – she’d need to be ten times as good as the other competitors just to have a chance of making it out alive.

The boys are a bit less clear-cut. Fred and George are unconventional geniuses. Ron is braver than he gives himself credit for and Neville surprised everyone in the DA last year. There’s a lot of talk about Harry’s chances, but he doesn’t know how much of that is on his merits and how much is due to the superstition that because both his parents were selected, he must be doubly unlucky. But on the other end of the scale, they both survived. They didn’t win – the first to the cup that year was Snape. And for refusing to murder each other, they’re all blood traitors. Snape is respected for his power but there will always be that tarnishing mark on his reputation. Ron thinks it’s why Snape hates Harry’s guts.

Harry doesn’t think any of it makes sense. Snape only revisits the memory of James Potter to bask in the fact that he’s dead. From what Harry’s heard, it doesn’t sound like they were any friendlier at the time. He would’ve expected them to leap at the chance to kill each other.

Uncle Sirius would know what happened, but he doesn’t like to talk about it. He said Harry was too young. Granted, Harry was only thirteen when they last lived together. They thought they’d have more time. Now, Harry might need to know, but Sirius is out of reach.

…

September is agonising. Harry passes people in the hallways and wonders which faces he won't see again. Some of them are going to die. It's horrible and wrong and he can't do anything to stop it.

His fuse is shorter than ever. He quickly earns several more detentions duelling with Malfoy and lackies. They're obnoxious and cruel and so, *so* ignorant, but he wouldn't wish the Games on them. He doesn't want them to die either. No one should.

Harry is carefully not thinking about his chances of being chosen. He doesn't want to enter the Games. He doesn't want to be paraded around, forced to fight, treated like an ingredient in a potion, to funnel power to the Ministry. But he'd rather die than watch his friends die. So if he thinks about his chances of not being chosen, he might do something that his friends would never forgive him for. He knows Ron is doing the same. But Ron doesn't have enough money for a bribe. Harry might, and that's another thing he's not thinking about. It's not fair to ask Ron to forgive him for doing the same thing he wouldn't forgive Ron for. But in the end, it is a moot point because Gryffindor doesn't start talking about volunteering a champion. They'll let bad luck decide and support whoever is picked.

Harry mopes for all of a week before he settles on something much more productive: anger.

He's staring at a potions essay. He can't focus. How could he worry about homework when his friends could be sacrificed in a sick game and he's helpless – but no, there is something he can do.

He slams his textbook closed and announces to the common room, "DA meeting in ten minutes. Anyone who wants to learn to fight, grab your wand and follow me."

There's a flurry of motion from the old DA members. Fred and George bundle up their prank products. Lee hollers for Angelina and Katie to get down from their dorm.

Harry grabs his bag and takes the stairs to this room two at a time. He's buzzing with restless energy.

"DA meeting now, if you're interested," Harry tells Neville and Seamus as he dumps his bag.

A moment later, two pairs of feet clatter down the stairs after him.

Harry pauses a few steps from the bottom. Almost all of Gryffindor is

looking at him expectantly.

Alright then.

The crowd parts for him. He meets Ron and Hermione by the portrait hole and leads the way to the Room of Requirement.

Hermione flashes a coin. “Do you want me to invite the rest of the DA?”

Harry falters. They’re Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Harry likes Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang but there’s a good reason he doesn’t invite them to Gryffindor Quidditch practice.

But they’re the DA – they’re *his*.

But they’re the competition. Where do you draw the line? It’s Hogwarts against the other schools. Gryffindor against the other houses. Boy against girl. Friend against friend. There’s only one victor and the Ministry don’t like survivors.

Harry could teach the spells that helps someone kill his friends.

“Invite them,” Harry decides.

The Room serves up the regular DA meeting area, but it’s much larger. It gives Harry a raised platform and the crowd is large enough that he needs it. There must be nearly two hundred people when the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs show up.

Harry takes a deep breath and tries not to talk too fast. “We formed the DA last year because our professor was useless. We were a study group. We wanted to pass our exams. This year, the stakes are a bit higher.”

A few young students giggle. Harry grins ruefully. His nerves settle.

“Last year, we united against terrible teachers. This year, the Games divide us. The Ministry tells us there can only be one victor, so we look at our classmates and friends and we see rivals. Not here. We’re in this shit together. We all deserve to grow old. We are stronger together. We can be many survivors instead of one victor.”

Some look around nervously. He is dangerously close to contradicting the Ministry. Sedition or treason – take your pick, it’s Azkaban either way.

“I’ll teach you defence. Dodging. Shielding. Healing. We don’t have much time. This isn’t for glory, it’s for survival. If you want to learn the most lethal offensive spells, teach yourself. We have less than two months. We better get started.”

Harry eases into the familiar role. He separates the old DA crew and puts Hermione in charge of revising what they learnt last year. They’re a bit rusty after the holidays.

Neville, bless him, volunteers to bring the youngest kids up to speed with basic shielding and disarming spells. Harry will have to set up a rotating roster so Neville can still get some practice in.

For the rest of the new students, Harry starts with last year’s DA lessons. The few that can’t cast a protego stronger than a soap bubble get mercilessly booted into Neville’s group; he’ll get them to the point where they can cover at least the full front of their body.

“When you’re attacked, you need to decide how to respond. Will you defend, or will you fight back? Your tactics will depend on your opponent – if they’re a better dueller than you, focus on your defence. Defending is easier than attacking, and that means you can hold off opponents that are much more skilled than you. You won’t defeat them, but you might escape. It’s a matter of learning various shield charms and practising to make them formidable. But let’s say your opponent isn’t quite that dangerous. Shield charms block incoming *and* outgoing spells. To counterattack, you need to drop the shield. That’s when things get tricky. Technically, you only need your shield raised for the split second when the spell hits, but shield flickering is an advanced duelling technique. We’ll start simple. Good shielding is about good timing. You don’t want to reflect your own spell back in your face,” Harry says. The Room provides them with a row of targets, each with a tally and a stopwatch. “Alternate between protego and expelliarmus. See how long it takes you to get to twenty hits.”

Competitiveness over the times is all the incentive they need. Harry does a few circuits to make sure they get the basic form, then he leaves them to practice. In Hermione’s group, Fred has just missed George by a mile and Harry knows he can do better than that, Fred just needs to be reminded about dropping his elbow.

The clock is chiming a warning about curfew before he knows it.

Harry hops back on the platform. There’s a buzz in the air, an intensity. It’s hope. The Games uprooted everything, left them waiting

powerless and uncertain. Now they can do something about it.

The restless anger inside Harry settles into a steely determination. "Good work. I'll be here every day from seven until curfew. I'll start a new spell set every Monday and we'll spend the rest of the week perfecting it. Drop in and out whenever you want."

The first week of meetings is manic. It's a lot of work. He wouldn't be able to do it without his friends pitching in. Hermione organises the lesson plans. Cho looks up useful wilderness survival and healing spells. Ron figures out strategies from analysing old duelling tournaments. Neville reviews the fundamentals. Luna gives some surprisingly coherent lectures on dealing with creatures. Ginny and Cedric take turns teaching their favourite curses. Fred and George share clever area-effect tricks – flashbang spells, floor freezing charms, the works. It splits up the teaching load.

As the students settle into a routine around homework, attendance drops back. Most people show up three or four times a week, which is often enough to learn the spells. It spreads the numbers to a more manageable size, at least. The old core of the DA come every day. On the weekends, only the dedicated show up; it's usually just the experience crew, so on weekends, they have *fun*.

They leave the structured duels behind because, in the Games, the threats won't line up the face you one at a time. The Room turns into an obstacle course; a forest, a swamp, a giant doll house (and Ron has a new phobia now, thanks, George). They arm themselves with paint spells until the clock chimes and the least colourful person wins.

Sometimes it's a free-for-all brawl. Sometimes there are teams. Sometimes Fred and George rig traps and everyone ends up dripping paint and smelling faintly of gunpowder.

Harry is feeling better about the chances of either twin in the Games– now it's a question of whether the arena would survive them.

"Oi, Potter! What'll it take to knock you down a peg?" George says, and the playful tone sparks more dread than a threat ever could.

Harry is clean. He's survived the last two weekends unmarked. He's too quick with his shield and too good at dodging for nearby splatter to get him.

They're going to ambush him. George has caught Harry in a dodgy spot.

He's beside a stream. Smooth, loose rocks make for poor footing. The gully walls are deep; it's precisely why he chose to hide down here. Regretting that, now. If the others man both banks they can rain spells down on his head. They can surround him without hitting each other – they learnt the perils of that last week.

Harry could transform and fly out. He'd only be defenceless for a second.

Or this mistake could turn into useful practice.

George sends up sparks. The others will already be heading toward his voice – Harry has a minute at most.

Harry disillusions himself. He's not completely invisible, but a lot harder to aim at. He sets a couple of quicksand traps and casts bombarda at the opposite bank – soil blasts everywhere. He'll make his escape up that slope. Loose soil settles on stream bed; it'll slow his feet but it's much better footing than the shifting stones.

There's a flash of light and Harry snaps up a rapid shield spell. George's purple paint splashes across his field of view, but that's a problem for later because the next attack comes from behind.

They're casting silently, the sneaky bastards. He sees it at the last second, and only because he was already turning.

Time slows. The air is thick. The water is almost still. The spell is red – Ron's colour. It will hit him in the chest. Harry takes half a step back and twists and the spell hits the gully wall. The spell bursts into a glob of red paint and the droplets hang in the air. Harry shields against the splash. Good practice; if that was something like bombarda, he'd need to.

Ron's timing was perfect, Harry's got to remember to tell him later.

Seven spells are heading his way– his protego will hold for five.

The first is wide. Harry doesn't need to worry about it.

Harry raises the stream behind him to a waterfall and freezes it solid. That'll block the three from behind. More importantly, he can stop looking over his shoulder unless someone breaks the barrier. They'll probably just run around and try to pin him against it.

The remaining three spells are close. One is high – not a problem

when he ducks and hunkers down behind a shield and counts two hits.

The paint drops with splat when he dispels the shield, and he can see they've got follow-up spells headed for him already.

Purple, orange – Fred and George. Pink – Cedric. Four yellows – Hermione is casting as fast as she can, trying to overwhelm his shielding and agility, or just keep him too busy to raise another ice wall. She's less accurate than usual, but in a way, the scatter is harder to counter – he can't dodge them all with one step.

Harry casts a shield to his left and holds it while George and Cedric batter away at it. …three, four, five, recast. One, two…

Ginny circles around his ice wall and walks straight into Harry's well-placed quicksand trap. She'll free herself in a second, but for that second, she can't dodge. Harry summons a branch behind her, and when she twists to shield against it, he nails her with green paint. She's got to retire from the fight.

Harry ducks and weaves around yellow spells, and after a few moments he triangulates exactly where Hermione is hiding. He spots the tell-tail shimmer of disillusionment and returns his own paint spell. It's an acid green, alarmingly similar to the Killing Curse. He fires a second to exactly follow the first, with just enough of a delay to allow time for Hermione to cancel her shield if she thinks there's only one.

He hasn't caught her with that trick for a while, but at least while she's dealing with that, she stops raining jinxes on him. He raises a second ice wall. They are less inclined to let that one survive, and it absorbs two blasts before it starts to crack. Before it crumbles, Harry scrambles up his exit ramp.

Ron has a spell heading for his face before he has even peaked over the bank. Yellow whizzes past his shoulder. So Hermione didn't fall for his trick.

Harry gets out of the gully clean and that is something he's putting down to no small amount of luck.

He's above the ice walls, now, fully exposed again. He races into the trees for cover and the chase is on.

Harry has whittled the pack down by the time Fred gets the drop on him. Literally – Fred jumped out of a tree, and that there is one of the

limits of a quick shield charm.

Harry squirms, but he's winded and half the size and Fred has five brothers – this is not his first tousle. He had Harry's limbs pinned the moment he fell, and it's too late –

"Fuco!" Hermione casts. Harry and Fred are dripping yellow paint.

"*Granger*," Fred clutches his chest. "Am I just collateral damage, to you? You *wound* me."

"Sorry, Fred. But I was picking green out of my hair all week."

"I think that's a yes, Harry. I am collateral! An instrument in revenge! I cannot muster the will to go on."

Fred collapses dramatically. Harry wheezes because, somehow, Fred got even heavier. Shove as he might, Harry is stuck. "What are you, part troll?"

"Percy does make me wonder," Fred says and ruffles Harry's hair, no doubt rubbing the paint in. Harry can feel it sticking up and collecting dirt and leaves. Harry huffs indignantly.

"Oh, let him up," Hermione giggles.

Fred turns and his grin widens.

Hermione narrows her eyes. "Don't you dare."

Harry braces himself on instinct. Hermione should know better than to evoke the power of 'don't' and 'dare'.

Fred springs off Harry, embedding him another inch into the dirt. "Oof!"

Harry sucks in sweet, beautiful oxygen to a chorus of shrieks and laughter.

Another freckled face hovers over him. Ron says, "Alright, mate?"

"Ugh," he answers.

Ron hauls him upright. Harry straightens his glasses, but no, he is seeing that right – Hermione is covered in paint and a Weasley.

"You gave us a real run-around," Ron says. "You're so much faster this

year!"

Harry shrugs. "I guess the practice paid off."

"No, Harry, I've never seen a human move that quickly. Professional Quidditch players don't have reflexes like that."

"Well, you follow the Cannons, so."

"Oi!" Ron gets him in a headlock.

"Cannons? Did I hear someone ask for an orange makeover?" Fred says. He's been hit with a paint spell at point-blank. He's got orange splattered all over his chest and under his chin. But orange is *his* colour.

Hermione, also very orange, is huffing and rolling her eyes the way she does when she's trying not to smile. She mutters something about "The spirit of the rules" – ah, Harry realises. Fred cast the spell on himself. He found another loophole in the rule of not firing at anyone once you've been tagged.

Fred and Hermione exchange a very particular look that Harry first noticed in fourth year. Harry calls it the Challenge. He's certain Hermione is already drafting another clause that Fred will be delighted to wriggle out of.

Ron elbows Harry to get his attention and eyes the two meaningfully. Harry's not sure what he's supposed to look at. He already knows Fred made it his mission to drive Prefect Hermione crazy by following her rules to the letter and still defying them every step of the way. They do this all the time.

Ron waits expectantly. Harry blinks. Ron rolls his eyes. "So quick in some ways. But in others…"

"Ron's right, Harry. You are too fast. I have a theory – I think it might be bleed-over," Hermione says.

"Oh? I did spend a lot of time in my animagus form over the summer."

"So did I," Hermione admits. "I've noticed my sense of smell and hearing dramatically improve and my hair is all but untameable. More so *when there's paint in it*."

Fred grins unrepentantly.

Harry crosses his eyes. “Tell me honestly – does my nose look more beak-like, to you?”

“Harry.”

“Ok, seriously, I think I know what you mean. When I’m scared or excited, it’s like the world slows down.”

“You what?” Ron frowns.

Hermione hums thoughtfully. “Animals experience time in different ways. Generally, the faster the animal moves, the faster it needs to sense and process information so it doesn’t run into anything. Insects and birds travel very quickly. A fly can see your hand moving to swat it like you’re moving through honey, it has plenty of time to react.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s exactly what it’s like in my form. Time almost stops. I thought it was part of the magic,” Harry says. “But it’s always happened to some degree – like in Quidditch, when a bludger comes at me or when I’m pulling out of a dive.”

“That happens to me, too. But it’s only for a split second and I end up with tunnel vision,” Fred says.

Ron nods too. “Oh, that. Same. Seeker Weekly ran an article. The Magpies’ keeper was convinced he’d been blessed by Chronos.”

“It’s common in sports players,” Hermione says. “Increased sensory input briefly causes a perceived slowing of time.”

“Right, well, today it lasted the whole fight,” Harry says.

“That is unusual. It must be bleed-over,” Hermione says.

“You talk fast when you’re excited. It’s really hard to hear you,” Ron says, putting the pieces together.

“Yeah, you’ve looked at bit manic this year,” Fred says, draping an arm over Harry’s resigned, now orange shoulders. “Never mind that. All the best people are.”

…

October goes the same way as September, only faster. Harry spends every spare moment in the Room, but it never feels like enough. He

pays attention in classes if they're useful and writes lesson plans instead of notes if they're not. He stops attending History entirely. Binns doesn't notice. He does the bare minimum in homework, and only that much because detentions would be an even bigger waste of time. During meals, tournament strategies and statistics replaces talk of Quidditch plays. Ron is just as good at finding the patterns in tasks as he is in teams.

"It's nowhere near random," Ron says. "There's only been two muggleborn victors in forty-three editions of the Games. They're overrepresent in the champion selection and way underrepresented in survivors."

"It's a cull," Hermione says.

"Yeah. Just look at the sponsorship rates. They'll send the purebloods through with a genie up their arse and let the muggleborns starve before spending a few knuts for bread," Ron says. "But it's not that simple. The Games kill purebloods at an even higher rate – purebloods are a third of the population but fifty percent of Champions. Some of that is because almost all volunteers are purebloods, but there's not enough volunteers to make up the difference."

Ron jabs the Prophet. A picture of the smug analyst he's annoyed with skitters out the way of his finger. "But throw enough purebloods into the mix and of course most victors will be purebloods. That's the only number most people will notice. If people also consider that purebloods are less than half the population, it makes them look even better. But that's wrong. It's a biased sample. Purebloods actually underperform if you consider how the champion demographics are skewed."

"Do muggleborns perform better, all things considered?" Harry asks.

"Merlin, no. The favouritism is brutal. Halfbloods do alright, though. Not that you'd know it from this rubbish," Ron says. Some of his poached egg ends up on the paper, this time. "They don't even give the total number of pureblood, halfblood and muggleborn champions."

And the effort required to get those numbers would deter all but the most curious. Hermione had to sift through dozens of old papers and tally it by hand.

"Most people are terrible at statistics," Ron says. The analyst earns a filthy glare. "She knows better. She calculates things properly when it

suits her."

"People don't know statistics because our schools don't teach it," Hermione scowls. "I'm sure the Ministry enjoys feeding people answers that no one can double check. Lies, damn lies and statistics."

"That the title of your autobiography, Granger?" A nasally voice cuts in. "You'd better get a move on if you want to publish that."

"Piss off, Malfoy," Harry says without turning around. He is so tired of dealing with this shit.

"You should mind your tongue. You wouldn't want me to pay the judges to elect Weasley and Granger, would you? It might cost extra to skip the House vote, or they may give me a discount for doing the world a favour!"

Harry doesn't reach for his wand. He doesn't even think. He probably would've cursed Malfoy, if he had. His arm snaps out and the next thing he knows, he's got the squirming boy by the collar, dragged into a stoop, nose to nose.

"Better make it three tickets and send me to represent Hufflepuff, in that case," he says quietly. Malfoy goes still at his tone. "Because I'd make you regret it."

"Mr Potter! Release him," Professor McGonagall calls. They're close to the head table, but Harry doesn't particularly care. Neither does he care if Malfoy is spouting empty words to get a reaction or to get Harry in trouble with the professors, more bark than bite as usual.

"One moment," Harry says pleasantly, not looking away from Malfoy's wide eyes. "But why stop at three? You'll need to get rid of Ron's protective siblings. And his parents. Nasty dueller, that Molly Weasley. I've got a werewolf and the head of your mother's family in my corner. They're not quite as scary as Molly, I know, but I'm sure they could make some trouble for you."

"Mr Potter!"

"Pull a stunt like that, and all your daddy's money won't save you from the consequences."

Harry lets go. Malfoy backpedals fast enough to fall over.

McGonagall sighs. "Twenty points from Gryffindor, Mr Potter. Mr

Malfoy, ten points from Slytherin. Return to your table."

It is a token punishment. House points don't rank highly in anyone's priorities this year.

"He pushed me!" Malfoy protests, cradling an elbow like he's hurt. But he gets a better look at the Gryffindor table and blanches.

There isn't a student in earshot that isn't ready to breathe fire. Ginny might actually be sparking. Ron's eyes promise the same revenge if Malfoy even thinks of pulling that trick on Harry and Hermione. Fred leans into Hermione, making it clear she's part of the family, orphan or not. Harry has never seen the twins look less like laughing. It makes his hair stand on end.

Malfoy leaves at a run.

Fred watches him go, poised on the edge of his seat. George is rifling through his bookbag. "Which product did we have to rework because it interacted badly with jinxes – was it the puking pastilles?"

"That's the one," Fred says. McGonagall has returned to the head table. Fred squeezes Hermione's shoulder and murmurs, "Excuse us." He and George stand as one.

Harry doesn't see much of Malfoy, after that.

Big game hunting

Chapter Summary

> We select our champions, meet our mentors and catch a train to the Ministry for a Ball.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Great Hall comfortably holds the Hogwarts cohort, somewhere around four hundred students. Somehow, they've managed to fit the entirety of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons inside as well, on eight additional tables. There must be some kind of space magic at work, because Durmstrang has twice as many students as Hogwarts and Beauxbatons has even more. It is no squishier than usual, but it certainly feels that way with the aurors lining the walls.

The professors are absent. The head table holds a giant wooden goblet in Dumbledore's usual spot. In front of it, a severe man.

"That's Percy's boss. Bartemius Crouch. He's a gamemaker and judge, and the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation," Ron hisses, not as quietly as he should.

Crouch raises his wand to the ceiling. Several omnioculars turn in his direction. There are dozens flying around the candles, recording everything.

"Blood is our inheritance and power. But power borrowed must be returned. It was All Hallows' eve, three centuries ago, today. The Ministry of Magic raised our world above and apart from the muggles. Their foresight bought our sanctuary, and now it falls to us to sustain it. We sacrifice, as our ancestors sacrificed, in an unbroken chain since the First," Crouch says, voice carrying. "Tonight, the barriers between worlds are at their thinnest. Tonight, the cycle of renewal begins again in this– the 44th Blood Games!"

There is a smattering of cheers, loudest from the Durmstrang and Slytherin side of the room – mainly purebloods.

Crouch allows the applause for precisely five seconds. "The Games return to Europe once every seven years. All students, and only students, are eligible to be selected as Champions. This is your chance

for glory in victory or sacrifice. One girl and one boy from each House will compete to be crowned the victor. Twenty-four start, but only one lucky person will complete the ritual by spilling a single drop of their blood in this– the Bloody Cup!"

Crouch flicks his wand, and a gleaming chalice appears. The gravity of the moment is somewhat undercut as Harry and Ron struggle not to react. Hermione rolls her eyes at them and mutters under her breath, "Oh, do grow up."

"The Goblet of Fire will light tonight and remain lit until the Games end. If the Goblet selects your name, you are bound by the ritual until it is complete. Champions will enter the Arena on New Year's Day and must do their utmost to survive."

He has scarcely finished speaking when the large wooden goblet flares blue. The flames are brighter than they should be and scatter eery shadows. The shadows deepen as the flames condense into a small ball, then turn red and flare upwards. A slip of paper flutters down when the flames retreat. Crouch snatches it from the air and clears his throat.

"We start with Beauxbatons! The female champion from House Flamel is Fleur Delacour!" Delacour is a stunningly beautiful witch with an almost Veela sheen. She is unsurprised and unphased by being chosen. She shakes Crouch's hand and stands on display in front of the high table.

Delacour is quickly joined by others. Simon Boutin, trembling with fear. Agnés Mazet. Sébastien Gauthier, achingly young, perhaps fourteen. Aurore Garnier. Gaspard Poulin. Joëlle Aubert. Jean Hennequin.

They've only gone through one school and Harry has already lost track of half the names. The other half concern him. It is difficult to judge magical prowess on physical characteristics; it can come in unassuming packages. Confidence is about as good an indicator as you can get. If Harry had to take bets on volunteers, he'd put his money on Delacour and Mazet. He's not sure about Poulin; he is a thin kid and something about the way he smiles makes Harry's hairs stand on end.

"Now for Durmstrang! To start with Atticus House – Sasha Pavelova Ivankova. And the male champion is Viktor Krum!"

Harry startles. That's not a name he's liable to forget; Krum is an international Quidditch seeker. Harry had no idea he was still in

school.

Elisabeth Görder is next and she makes Harry's heart clench – she looks about twelve.

Hanno Bronner is the kind of big guy who looks like he enjoys violence. Irina Ganz; unassuming but her confidence is tripping Harry's sense for danger. Nikul Zlaten Penchev. Marina Yoanova Stoeva and Nencho Dragomirov Romanov; both are either volunteers or grateful for the opportunity.

"Yes, congratulations Durmstrang, a fine selection of witches and wizards. But now we come to this year's hosts, Hogwarts!"

Harry's heart kicks up a gear.

"From Gryffindor House, ladies first; the female champion is Hermione Granger!"

Harry's eyes sink shut and the world stops. She stands and the spot beside him is empty and cold. He feels hollow. His pulse is all he can hear.

"… champion… Harry Potter!"

Harry's eyes blink open. He's moving. He's heading further into the hall like he does every day. He's shaking Crouch's hand and he feels unclean just from touching it. He is numb because the worst already happened as soon as Hermione stood.

"Well, this sucks," he mutters.

Hermione gives a startled titter and pinches him for making her laugh at such an inappropriate moment. He manages a cheeky grin and feels a little lighter. She's not alone. They've escaped certain peril together before, they can do it again.

He blinks and takes in the crowd for the first time, the swarm of omnioculars, the watchful aurors. The shadows flare again, and he thinks of the goblet behind him, the Cup next to it. He imagines, for a moment, how satisfying it would be to spill his blood in it right now – ruin their Games before they get their spectacle. No sacrifices and twenty-four blood traitors. There'd be a riot.

It is a pretty fantasy. The aurors would stop him before he could turn around.

A shaking Amelia Bones from Hufflepuff walks up beside Harry. She's a third year.

"Don't." Hermione's warning tone stops Harry in his tracks. He has taken half a step towards Crouch. Shouting won't accomplish anything. It'll just make things harder. "The world started judging us as soon as our names were called. We must play smart."

We – meaning he and Hermione are a team. Any punishment Harry earns will also hurt Hermione. It's the only thing that stops Harry from giving Crouch a piece of his mind.

"The male champion from Hufflepuff is Cedric Diggory! Now, from Ravenclaw, the female champion is Sybill Trelawney! The male champion is Roger Davies!"

Harry is used to looking at Cedric and Davies and seeing competition, but he's having a hard time seeing his friendly Quidditch rivals as an existential threat. They're both smart and strong, and as seventh years they've got an extra year of schooling on him and Hermione. They might fight to win and if Harry wants to live, he should be prepared for anyone to turn on him. He still can't picture it.

Trelawney, he doesn't know anything about, other than she's one of Luna's roommates and they're not friends.

"The female champion for Slytherin is Bellatrix Black!"

Slytherin gives her a standing ovation, far outstripping the subdued clapping the other Hogwarts Houses granted their champions.

Harry thinks with strange calm, *so that's how we're going to die*. That's how it ends. Not with a bang, but a curly-haired nutcase skipping up the aisle. She sat at the far end of the room, not doubt to prolong the attention.

The Hogwarts champions keep their eyes locked on her, much as they would if someone let a manticore into the Great Hall. The Beauxbatons and Durmstrang champions quickly clue in that this is Not Good.

Bellatrix locks eyes with Hermione and grins. She scans the foreign students like their blood status is spelt out on their foreheads. Fleur Delacour gets a grin.

Again– Manticore.

“Yes, congratulations, Miss Black,” Crouch says, trying to draw the crowd’s attention back in. “And finally, your male Slytherin champion, Tom Riddle!”

Well, Crouch wanted attention. The Hogwarts students stare at him like they’re waiting for him to admit he misspoke.

But the Slytherins aren’t up in arms. Many cheer – mainly the ones Harry’s seen hanging around Riddle. The rest aren’t surprised. Oh, they aren’t *happy* about it. At best it’s a kind of satisfaction that Harry last saw on Malfoy’s face when he enumerated the ways Gryffindors might die. But they still clap politely, because this is their decision, their House, and they stand by it. Slowly, it sinks in with the rest of the school: Slytherin has a muggleborn champion.

Everyone knew if the Goblet worked the way it was supposed to, Riddle would be a shoe-in. He’s the smartest and strongest in the school, let alone his House. But it’s a snowy day in hell when Slytherin deigns to elect a halfblood – Snape was only the second ever. They’ve never picked a muggleborn, and no one expected they ever would.

Tom Riddle ignores it all. He rises gracefully and basks in the applause despite it being half-hearted – or maybe because of it. His smirk seems to say *look how they all fall in line; hate me, fear me or love me; they all do as I say.*

Riddle’s always carried confidence, but now there’s a prowl in his gait. It makes Bellatrix’s manticore look like a kneazle.

Riddles says something that makes Crouch chuckle, exchanges pleasant greetings with his classmates Cedric and Roger, and the tension in the Hall flows away. But apparently it flowed straight into Harry. His heart rate kicks up. His peripheral awareness of Bellatrix, the Durmstrang champions and that creepy Beauxbatons wizard fade and his sense of danger focuses fixedly on charming, handsome Tom Riddle.

Ron’s voice echoes in his ears. *Ten times as powerful as the next best pureblood… Dumbledore’s league in intelligence and power.*

He smiles at Hermione on the way past, and his gaze flicks to Harry next, polite and distant. But only for the first instant. Riddle’s eyes sharpen and bore into Harry’s.

And the nundu in the grass realises the prey has spotted him.

Harry wonders if Riddle can smell fear. Or defiance. Gryffindors aren't known for their healthy response to fear.

It is only a second, all told. Riddle hesitates just enough for it to register as a delay in his stride, then it's back to blasé as he takes his place at the end of the line.

Crouch speaks, and Harry realises he was staring and quickly looks back to the crowd. "Congratulations! From now to the end of your days, you are champions!"

For most of them, the end of their days is fast approaching. The title rings hollow, to say the least.

Harry finds Ron's face in the crowd. He looks gutted. Harry's heart clenches and he has to look away. Ron is safe. Ron has to watch both his best friends fight to the death and he can't help. Harry wouldn't trade places for the world.

…

The champions have one more night at Hogwarts, but it's not the same. They aren't students anymore. The champions are firmly escorted to three tents with Ministry seals on the grounds. Aurors stand at the entrance, facing inwards, just in case there was any doubt about what they were guarding. Their friends aren't allowed to approach them. Those that try are bluntly told to get packing – the remaining Hogwarts students will be sent off to Beauxbatons tomorrow until the tournament is over.

In the morning, the champions are escorted back inside the castle.

"The Hogwarts Express will arrive shortly to take you to the Ministry. You will receive breakfast en route. Your friends and families are waiting for you in the Great Hall. You have fifteen minutes until the carriages leave."

Hermione looks startled. "You think –?"

"He'd better not," Harry says and hurries into the Hall. There are a lot more people than he expected, and he's immediately frustrated; he doesn't want to spend his fifteen minutes searching. He doesn't have to.

A bark, the scratch of claws on stone, and Harry turns just in time to brace himself before one hundred and fifty pounds of dog hits him at

full pelt. He staggers but thankfully manages not to go flying back out the doors.

“Padfoot!” Harry says and hugs him. On his back legs, Padfoot towers over people; his head reaches halfway down Harry’s back. He is trembling and panting and whining deep in his chest. More than anxious – terrified. It’s because of Harry and Harry can’t do anything about it but hug him tighter.

Harry looks nervously at the nearest auror. The auror is curling his lip. Wizards are not dog people. But he’s not charging over to arrest an unregistered animagus and fugitive.

“Pets are family,” Harry protests, to sell the disguise.

Padfoot woofs at that, then he jumps on Hermione. She looks a little misty-eyed. Padfoot assures her that she is family too, then he runs a few circles. He wants them to follow.

Padfoot leads them to a small crowd; Remus, Tonks, Luna, Neville, and just about every Weasley.

Ron reaches them first and he drags Harry and Hermione into a tight hug. “You’d both better come back.”

“We will,” Harry says.

“Give ‘em hell,” Fred and George are the next to grab them. “I’ll demonstrate,” George winks and disappears into the crowd, alone. Fred doesn’t let go of Hermione.

“Good luck, Harry,” Neville says gravely. “I believe in you. You’re better than anyone at Defence. Hermione, you’re the smartest person I know.”

Luna nods. “Be careful. There are a lot of nargles in the Ministry. Don’t trust anyone, they could be infected.”

Ginny squeezes the life out of Hermione first, then Harry. Harry can’t tell if she’s blushing or just furious. Either way, she’s beyond full sentences. “Survive,” she demands.

Molly is in tears, and while she’s fussing, Arthur is offering advice. “Remember, the Games have started. Set yourselves in the best position you can before you enter the arena. Listen to your mentors; quiz them about pre-arena tactics. Learn everything you can about the

other champions."

Bill adds his suggestions, "People change, in the Games. You have a friendship, that's powerful, but don't mistake alliances for the same – they don't last. Don't trust anyone else with your life. The tasks are designed to turn champions against each other. The gamemakers only want one victor. Don't think you can take everyone home."

Harry doesn't like that idea. He nods, though. He's going to have to get used to a lot of things he doesn't like. Padfoot pushes his head into Harry's stomach, and Harry runs his hands through his fur. It's soothing.

Uncle Remus and Tonks are used to Padfoot getting in the way; they claim their hugs and squish Padfoot into Harry's side.

"Stick together. Play to your strengths," Remus says. "You're competing against the other champions, but never forget; first, you're competing against the Games. They've got rules, traditions, expectations – *exploit them*. It's a show. Harry, your parents survived because James courted the sponsors, Lily manipulated the arena and Severus spied on the other champions."

"Right. Okay."

"You are incredible people," Uncle Remus says, looking between Harry and Hermione. "We love you both."

"Thank you, Remus," Hermione says. "Will someone take care of Crookshanks for me?"

"I will," Fred says.

"You'd better not test your products on my cat. He'll make you regret it," Hermione quips.

Fred grins his nearest approximation of innocence and drops his arm from her shoulders to her waist for a gentle squeeze. "I can promise restraint for about three months. You'll probably have to march straight from the arena to sort things out."

"And Hedwig?" Harry asks, his heart clenching with the idea of his loyal owl barred from finding him, circling alone forever.

"We'll take her," Uncle Remus says.

“No fair; you get the pretty one,” George reappears to join Padfoot in leaning on Harry.

“Do me a favour?” Harry murmurs to George. “Take care of Ron. He doesn’t like letting us charge into danger without him. He’ll worry.”

“Well, my better half is adopting a cat, I suppose a brother is much the same thing,” George accedes.

“Thanks.” There’s a pause, then Harry observes, “It’s been longer than fifteen minutes.”

“Unforeseen circumstances,” George declares with satisfaction.

“It couldn’t be the whispers I heard about some thestrals getting loose?”

“Oh, dear. I hope not,” George says, mustering all the sincerity of someone who only has passing familiarity with the concept. “That’d be a disaster. You know, most Ministry officials can’t see them?”

“How?” Harry wonders. The Games are televised and the deaths aren’t censored. Viewing is compulsory. Do most people close their eyes or something?

“Turns out you have to see, understand and mourn death. Says a lot about them as people, don’t it?” George says.

Harry snorts darkly.

“Take care of yourself. And Hermione, too. They’ll tell you you’re out of line and try to prod you until you’re just as empty as them. Stick a firework up in their authority, for me,” George says.

Harry knows. They’ve had judgmental eyes on them this whole time. The purebloods restrain themselves from genuine displays of emotion in public. Pride or disdain are the only ones allowed; they’ve got so much of those that it leaks out everywhere.

Harry spotted Malfoy and his parents earlier. Bellatrix is Narcissa Malfoy’s sister and Draco’s aunt, if Harry remembers Sirius’s family tree correctly. He could practically hear them sneering, “How uncouth.”

Harry does a quick scan now. Diggorys gushing about Cedric; a blinding beautiful family with Fleur Delacour that Bill is eyeing

curiously; Tom Riddle, surrounded by peers.

A Ministry official hurries into the room and takes a second to straighten his robes. He looks rather cross and out of breath. Harry's lips twitch. "Champions, proceed to the carriages."

Fred reluctantly lets go of Hermione. Harry gives Padfoot one last hug, and then Ron, and then Remus, and then –

"*Now*, please!"

It's one carriage per House. Hermione waits for Hogsmeade to appear ahead. Harry watches Hogwarts until it disappears behind the trees.

"We're going to win this," Hermione declares.

She's got that look in her eye that preceded brewing Polyjuice in an abandoned bathroom, raiding Snape's private stores, rescuing a hippogriff with a time turner, and spearheading an illegal defence club. So, yeah, Harry believes her. He leans forward. "What happens next?"

"We'll meet our mentors on the Express. They'll be previous victors or survivors. There aren't enough mentors for every champion, so some Houses will only have one. Two mentors would provide alternate points of view and be an advantage, but not an insurmountable one. Anyway, tonight, the Ministry will dress us up for a ball."

"A ball?!"

"Yes, a ball. We'll be required to dance the first together, then we can go our separate ways or portray ourselves as partners. I think we should strike a balance; present a united front but spend time independently, to make it clear we're not overly reliant on each other. Besides, we'll have a lot to do and that way we can cover more ground."

"We're formidable alone, we're even better together," Harry nods. He can get behind that angle. It's true.

"Which sponsors will be looking for, because we won't always be together. The games consist of three tasks, and the first is usually an individual challenge. The tasks start in January, at Hogwarts. We'll return to the castle soon after the ball and undergo special preparation. But first; the ball. There are several things I want to check off."

Hermione pulls a list out of her pocket.

Harry makes a show of rolling his eyes. Hermione kicks his shin.

“The ball is an opportunity for the rich and famous to rub elbows– they’re potential sponsors.”

“Sponsors should be our priority, right now,” Harry realises. “We won’t get another chance to talk to them directly.”

“Precisely. There are interviews and exams, later, but first impressions are important. We need to make connections,” she says.

“And our pureblood competitors will have met half the attendees and be related to the rest,” Harry says dryly. “Amos Diggory works in the Ministry and Roger’s father is some big name behind the Prophet. The Blacks have bred into half the families with seats on the Wizengamot.”

“The Bones family has a long history with the DMLE. Trelawney is halfblood but related to a line of famous Seers. One night won’t be enough to catch up to their connections, but we can make waves. We’re relatively unknown, so more attention will be on us. If it goes well, we can be a pleasant novelty, a sensation that will dominate the media hype.”

“And if we blow it, we really blow it.”

“Insulting anyone would not be a good idea, yes,” Hermione says. “You won’t like them. There will be toadies, politicians, rich snobs.”

“The judgemental ones. Yippee. Do you know how to dance?”

“Well enough.”

Harry sighs with relief. “Can you teach me?”

“Of course.”

…

The carriage stops at the station. They step onto the train. It’s weird, not carrying an owl cage in one hand and bumping his trunk down the aisle with the other. He’s got nothing but his wand and the uniform he wore to the Goblet of Fire ceremony. His robes feel starchy from laundering charms.

“What do you say, waltz around the cabin? Foxtrot up the aisle?”

Harry asks. He's only got a vague idea of what a foxtrot is.

Hermione smiles. "If I can get you foxtrotting before we arrive, I'll think about it."

Harry finds the door marked Gryffindor and pauses. "Well, there's enough room."

The cabins are magically expanded. There's a low coffee table, several lounges beside a full row of windows, and a breakfast buffet along one wall.

"This is brilliant, why aren't they always like this?" Harry wonders.

"It would be a fun trip if we could fit all our friends in one compartment."

They settle with full plates next to the windows as the train starts to move.

"We should watch the other champions at the ball. See who they talk to, how much interest they garner, that sort of thing," Hermione says.

"Right. Yeah, I've got a few ideas who to keep an eye on. Delacour, Poulin, Ganz, Romanov, Bronner." He raises an eyebrow because Hermione is writing it down.

She shrugs. "You have better people instincts than I do. Who else do you have a bad feeling about?"

"Bellatrix Black, obviously."

"Obviously," Hermione agrees. They've both run afoul of her wand in lonely corridors.

Harry shivers. "And she's not even the worst! How did I never notice how bloody scary Tom Riddle is before now?"

"Tom?" Hermione's eyebrows rise.

"You didn't see it? He –"

The door opens and Professor McGonagall enters, her lips pressed so thin they're just a severe line. "Hello, Miss Granger, Mister Potter. I hope you are as well as can be, given the circumstances."

"Professor!" Hermione greets and rises, then looks uncertain if she was

supposed to. “We were just discussing our strategy for the ball.”

“Foxtrot up the aisle,” Harry nods seriously.

Hermione throws him a look of pure exasperation. But it worked; she relaxes again.

McGonagall takes a seat across from them. “We will have to wait for your mentor to discuss any unconventional tactics, Mister Potter.”

Harry is confused. “Aren’t you our mentor?”

“I am Miss Granger’s mentor.”

The door opens to a swirl of black robes. It looks like a dementor is trying to get inside. Honestly, Harry would prefer if it was.

“Oh, no,” Harry realises.

Professor Snape sneers. “Ungrateful as ever, Potter.”

“I’m supposed to be grateful that the person who is supposed to be my best hope hates my guts and is only happy when Slytherin wins?” Harry says incredulously.

Snape’s nostrils flair dangerously at the backchat.

“Potter, sit down. Have a biscuit,” Professor McGonagall says. It’s not optional. She directs Snape into another chair with a Look. “Now, do you and Miss Granger wish to be trained together?”

“Yes,” Harry and Hermione agree.

“Then we can proceed. We do not have much time before the ball.”

Snape lounges back. “I expect Granger has already held your hand and walked you through it? Do I have to make you repeat it in your own words to make sure you’ve understood?”

“Severus,” Professor McGonagall warns.

Harry quickly and concisely summarises everything they’ve discussed, just to spite him.

“You seem to have a grasp of it,” Professor McGonagall says. “I would offer several suggestions: don’t refuse any dances. It makes a statement, depending on who it is, and in general, you should avoid

making statements you don't know the meaning of. Don't drink the alcohol; you'll need your wits about you. Severus and I will be in attendance and many people will demand our time and yours, but try to check in regularly."

Snape shakes his head. "I will be working; do not interrupt me. It will be hard enough extolling your virtues, limited as they are, without you blundering in. I will find you if we must speak."

Harry suspects he'll have no trouble following that directive.

Suddenly, a large mirror on the wall flashes, and a man fills the frame. He looks past his prime and still in denial about it. "Good morning, witches and wizards of Europe. I'm Lugo Bagman and this is the coverage of the 44th Blood Games!"

Bagman dribbles on about history and tradition. The usual propaganda. Harry pays more attention when he goes over the highlights of the last few Games. Victors get a full highlight reel of their best moments and kills like they're goals in a Quidditch match. Survivors are picked over for flaws and comedic mistakes, and it's always pointed out where they could've won but didn't have the strength.

Harry glares at the mirror. Snape doesn't deride him for it.

The details get sparser further back. Bagman spends more time on the 41st Games, reminding viewers that they have a legacy champion this year, the son of Lily and James Potter. Professor Snape's eyes go tight. Harry's parents look young – *were* young, just fifteen. Damn. James was a creative dueller, Lily was skilled with area effect wards and Snape was ruthless with curses. The brief highlights show enough that Harry understands why Sirius never wanted to talk about it.

By the 36th Games, McGonagall gets barely a mention for winning and her fellow survivors, Shacklebolt and McKinnon, get none at all. Evidently, eternal fame only lasts about sixty years, unless you're a ruthless dictator. Bagman spends a good long while on Grindelwald and his heroics in the 29th Games. The way they present it, you'd be forgiven for believing Grindelwald singlehandedly defeated a score of monsters and champions with twice his experience, at just thirteen, and that the tiny ginger boy by his side who is evidently not worth mentioning didn't amount to much – but that there is the great Albus Dumbledore.

The only victor to rival Grindelwald's screen time does so for an

entirely different reason. Newt Scamander is famous as the illegitimate victor, anathema to everything a victor is supposed to be – gentle, modest, respectful of every person and creature he came across. He didn't hurt anyone, despite winning several duels. Leta Lestrange was favoured to win that year, and she almost did, picking off the other champions right to the end. When it became clear Scamander would win the race to the cup, she committed suicide rather than live with the shame of being a survivor. The Ministry laud her as a hero – her selfless act saving society from Scamander's cowardice.

The Ministry's message is crystal clear.

Bagman returns to the present year. Harry watches closely. The playback of the Goblet of Fire ceremony captured much more detail than was possible to see from inside the crowd. Only Delacour, Mazet, Stoeva, Bellatrix and Riddle look pleased by being chosen. But that may not be an indication of who volunteered – Harry's expression upon being chosen was as inscrutable as theirs.

Professor Snape commentates as it progresses, mentioning blood status, notable political connections, and mentors. It's useful information if you ignore almost everything he says.

"Madam Maxime; headmistress, formidable with charms. She took a personal interest in mentoring Delacour," Snape says. "Delacour is part veela. She'll ensnare your weak minds and finish you off in a heartbeat."

"Krum has a rabid fanbase and an uncle in Bulgarian Ministry delegation. In short– more than enough sponsors to carry him through the tasks with a silver broom up his backside. Karkaroff is mentoring him personally because Karkaroff has a highly inflated sense of his own prowess."

"Ganz is the European under-seventeen duelling champion. Her mentor, Arnold Schwartz, has also been her trainer for three years. You won't beat her in a fight."

"Were you trying to impersonate an addict on a Mood Changing Potion, Potter? Giggling? Death by stare? If you're aiming to unsettle your competitors, I'm afraid you'll never hold a candle to Miss Black."

Harry is just glad that, in his daze, he managed to find the stage and look stoic instead of catatonic.

“Professor Flitwick is mentoring Mr Diggory. Do I need to remind you that Professor Flitwick is a national duelling champion or do you pay attention to people other than yourselves? Diggory’s father is popular in the Ministry, which is a sign that standards are slipping if I’ve ever seen one.”

“Dumbledore is mentoring Trelawney. I wouldn’t worry about what he can impart on her; he always takes the hopeless cases.”

“Rodolphus Lestrange is mentoring Bellatrix Black. Slytherin has good prospects this year,” Snape says. Having just seen some of what Lestrange was capable of fifty years ago, Harry is understandably concerned. Lestrange stood out as a level of unhinged above the other bloodthirsty victors.

“Barty Crouch Junior, son the gamemaker, is mentoring Tom Riddle. It is safe to assume Riddle will receive inside information on the tasks, a further advantage on top of the knowledge, experience and social graces he has on either of you.”

Hermione considers the information, runs through some numbers and adds Cedric Diggory and Viktor Krum to the list of champions to scrutinise.

“But we still want to keep an eye on everyone – if we focus too narrowly, we might miss the sneaky ones,” Hermione says.

“Certainly. Now, do you have any strengths or weaknesses we might not know of?” Professor McGonagall asks.

Snape sighs. “You hardly need to give Potter an opportunity to brag, Minerva.”

Harry keeps his mouth stubbornly shut.

“Talentless – as I thought,” Snape says.

There’s no winning with this guy, Harry thinks, resigned.

Hermione bristles indignantly. If there’s anything she hates more than Harry and Ron slacking or dismissing their accomplishments, it’s other people doing it. “Harry is a good dueller.”

“Scrapping with Mr Malfoy in the corridors does not constitute a talent.”

“Harry taught half of Hogwarts and got better results than the majority of our Defence professors. We’ve been working on spell repertoires, speed of casting, shielding and dodging. He’s really good.”

Harry raises an eyebrow. Really good might be overselling it. He’s fast and he knows some spells. He’s not the European duelling champion. The DA only started practising last year, and Harry doesn’t have much more experience than them.

Sirius taught Harry to duel, but he taught Harry to run first, in the grim years after his parents were killed. He got a toy wand for his ninth birthday; Sirius showed him the shield charm and spent months lobbing dung bombs and colour changing charms at him Harry got quick enough that it stopped being funny. That could’ve been training, or just Sirius being Sirius. The aurors came for Sirius in Harry’s third year, and that put an end to any productive training.

Snape opens his mouth, but Professor McGonagall speaks first. “Excellent. We will assess your skills later.”

Hermione hesitates. “Is it true that, while the Goblet is lit, we are unbound by restrictions on magic?”

“Yes.”

“And any illegal curses or rituals are permitted? Does this include licensed skills such as apparition?”

“Yes, to both.”

“We’re animagi.”

Snape rolls his eyes and mutters something uncomplimentary about James Potter that Harry decides not to hear. They need help. They’re relying on Snape to cosy up to his bigoted friends.

“I see. I assume you completed the transformation last night?” McGonagall asks dryly. “How fortuitous, then, that you were chosen and not rendered criminals.”

There must be a dozen animagi in each school, chiefly those most paranoid about this exact tournament. It’s no wonder the mentors have this down to standard procedure, bending to rules a bit to protect their students.

Except for Snape, who, as ever, just seems to be digging for trouble. “I

presume Mr Weasley is, as well?"

"He isn't," Harry answers truthfully. Arthur Weasley isn't an animagus, and Harry's prepared to swear that under veritaserum. It's not Harry's fault that Snape wasn't more specific.

Snape's mouth quirks oddly. "Your forms?"

"A European red fox," Hermione answers.

"Bird," says Harry.

"Both are useful," McGonagall comments.

"Hmph," says Snape.

"Now, unless there's anything else you'd like to confess, we have to decide whether to play up your strengths or hide them," Professor McGonagall continues.

"Um…" Harry says.

"Perhaps we should wait to get a better idea of the competition?" Hermione says tentatively.

"If you want to bore the sponsors," Snape says.

"She's not suggesting we pretend we're useless," Harry glares. Snape's eyebrow rises pointedly on 'pretend'. Sour bat. Harry clenches his fists and restrains the rest of his reaction. "We won't lie about anything. Just leave something to the imagination. Give them enough to be curious, hold back enough that it's obvious we are holding back, and let them wonder how much. That seems to be the most flexible option and it'll probably make us *less* boring."

Hermione smiles. "Precisely what I was thinking."

"And what we would suggest," Professor McGonagall adds.

"Presuming, of course, that either of you possess the necessary restraint," Snape says. He doesn't straight out call them an attention seeker and a know-it-all in front of McGonagall, but he's said it so often that he doesn't need to.

"Potter has a head start, being half-blood and gossip-column-famous," Snape's lip curls. "He can get away with leaving more a mystery than Granger. It takes more from a muggleborn to impress."

“You will have to evaluate the response of the people you speak with and find the balance,” Professor McGonagall says. “Now; dancing. If you make a poor showing you will be condemned as uncivilised.”

“Because a teenage murder tournament is so civilised,” Hermione mutters, then clamps a hand over her mouth like she can shove the words back in.

“That was dangerously close to interrupting a teacher,” Harry whispers, grinning.

But McGonagall is looking suspiciously supportive as she stands. “On your feet, please.”

She waves her wand and music fills the cabin.

“First, the supplicant bows and asks for the dance – Mr Potter, that’ll be you this time. The recipient shows their acceptance by offering their hand. Precisely so, Miss Granger. Potter, place her hand on your elbow and guide her to the dancefloor. Put your hand on her waist – your other hand.”

Snape gets his fill of critiquing their every move and then decides he has better things to do. Once he’s left, they can relax and learn much quicker. They don’t get to foxtrot up the aisle. Apparently, the upper echelons of society are too dignified for fun and might have some kind of adverse reaction if they’re exposed to it.

By the time the train pulls into the station, Harry thinks he can manage the ball without embarrassing himself. At least he won’t look like a lost child.

Chapter End Notes

> Next up, I'm sure you can imagine, is the Ball. We'll have Tom Riddle in his element and see how Harry copes.
> Let me know what you like so far and what you think/hope is going to happen next. I haven't written something like this before, feedback is welcome.

Into the lion's den

Chapter Summary

> The champions are prettied up and paraded into the Ministry for a sponsor Ball.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The train pulls into King's Cross. Mentors and champions gather near the doors, which means Snape is forced to endure their presence once again, and for that, he's sourer than before.

It's all Harry can do not to punch his mentor. He might've if his frustration wasn't split between Snape and the idiot that assigned him to Harry – probably Dumbledore. Harry's finding it hard to forgive the Headmaster's optimism when it means Harry is doomed.

Snape gestures mockingly out the door. "Your adoring fans await."

Harry is startled. "They do?"

They do. It's horrific. The platform is twice as full as he's ever seen it. Wall to wall people cheering and crying hysterical, *happy* tears. People are thanking them, desperate to shake their hands and demanding their signatures. They would overrun the champions if not for a magical barrier.

At least half of them are wearing Krum Quidditch merchandise, but among the rest, Harry spots a stylised banner of his face with his zigzag scar highlighted in bright yellow. Once he sees that, he notices other lightning bolts scattered through the crowd; they've latched onto it as a symbol. It's his most distinctive feature. Do they know and just not care that they're throwing the worst day of his life back at him?

Hermione stiffens. Harry grabs her hand and tries to joke, "Always glad to support local entrepreneurs."

Harry is reeling. He thought he'd come to terms with his parents' deaths. He doesn't care about seeing his scar in the mirror. But fear of him or Hermione dying in this tournament is dragging back the memories of the last time he brushed so close to death.

Harry feels eyes on him, which is a ridiculous feeling to note, because of course there are hundreds of eyes on him, but a pair feel different from the rest.

Harry glances around. Riddle is looking at him. Why? Is he annoyed at Harry's inherent lead in the popularity contest? There are no signs that say Riddle or Granger.

The champions and their mentors are herded out of the station, where a line of twelve open-top carriages await.

A sharply dressed wizard hands them up and shuts the doors. Immediately, Harry's ears pop like someone raised a powerful ward.

Hermione eyes the rim of the carriage. It's hard to tell in the bright light, but it's glowing slightly. The door completed the circle. "Is that an age line?"

"There are no House points to win here," Snape says. He's in a double-period-of-Gryffindors level foul mood, glaring at the spectators.

This is the guy who is supposed to charm money out of sponsors. Harry is doomed.

"It is," Professor McGonagall answers.

Age lines are supposed to guard liquor cabinets and such. Harry's never seen one. There certainly weren't any in Sirius' house. Harry resists the urge to poke it. The punishment is probably more than a sharp zap.

The carriages keep to the main roads, bypassing the twisting alleys of Diagon and Knockturn. Witches and wizards line the road the whole way.

They're waving flags and shouting in languages from all over Europe and more places that Harry doesn't recognise.

Some people keep pace on brooms, carpets and horses, dodging fireworks and – is that a flying *ship*?

The whirlwind carries them to the steps of the Ministry, where it abruptly stops. The crowd continues to roar, a pressure pushing them forward, but the building itself is clear of the rabble; no crowds cover its glory and they do not push their luck in the no-fly zone.

Harry's only ever seen it from a distance, and it is visible from *quite* a distance. It's the largest building in the city, looming on the skyline from any point in the surrounding alleys. It was built, like many parliamentary buildings, to emulate Rome and all it represents. It is the kind of place that demands worship. The size is entirely appreciable, standing on the steps. The marble columns seem impossibly large and the doors stretch halfway to the heavens. The air is cold. It's probably always cold, here, in the shadow of the Ministry, Harry wonders if the sun ever reaches this far down. The stone sucks whatever heat remains. It is so blindingly white that Harry feels the need to walk softly, lest he leave marks. Professor McGonagall pulls her cloak tighter and marches grimly forward.

A full squad of aurors is waiting inside and they close in around the champions. They don't tolerate sightseeing, pushing a brisk pace through the atrium with the only pause at security.

The guards are thorough. They confiscate a folding mirror from one of the Durmstrang girls – it must be enchanted. Another is relieved of a very pointy hairpin that looks dangerous enough on its own merit.

Wouldn't want anyone to get hurt, Harry thinks darkly.

Overlooking it all is the famous statue. It shows a witch and wizard presiding over a hoard of grateful magical creatures. They all stand on a globe, representing the alternate dimension full of muggles they came from, and the tenuous connection that remains. The door is somewhere here, in the building; opened only to retrieve muggleborns or to cast squibs out.

The wizard figure is larger than the rest. He holds his arms out, too proud to be welcoming, and Harry thinks it's supposed to offer guidance. If there's more than a passing resemblance to Minister Grindelwald, then surely that's *providence*, not selective editing. Harry snorts.

A security guard gives Harry a suspicious look and does a second pass with the weapons detector.

…

The champions are hustled away into separate dressing rooms. Harry is locked in a studio with a pair of stylists. They strip him down and make satisfied chuffing noises because he's given them some shape to work with.

“He looks like he plays Quidditch. Good sport, that. It develops nice lean muscle tone,” one says.

Harry’s input, as their mannequin, isn’t required or desired. But their utter disinterest in him as a person – casually cruel as it is – makes it easier to stand bare in front of them.

“I’m glad we got an older one this time. The last one hadn’t grown into his knees and elbows,” the other comments.

Their spells wash his hair and scrub the rest of him raw, while they tut like it’s his fault he didn’t shower last night. He’s plucked, pinched and waxed. His skin stings, and then he’s smothered in a weird smelly foam. They put makeup on him, covering moles and blemishes, but they don’t cover any of his scars.

Harry is miserable. Then he remembers Snape, the greasy git, had to go through the same thing, and the situation is suddenly a lot funnier.

Their wands conduct fabric snaking towards him. There’s wrapping, pinning, trimming; layers upon layers. They build the clothes on him and they fit perfectly; the way things only can when they’re not designed to come on or off.

First are black trousers in some material he can’t identify but is undoubtedly expensive. They certainly don’t ruin the lines with buttons or zips. Is he going to have to cut his way out of this later? Hold his bladder all bloody night?

He steps into shiny shoes when they shuffle over and nudge incessantly at his toes. Once they’re on, the shoes grow a bit more heel, which Harry takes personally. He’s a perfectly average height, thanks.

The stylists stick him in a gold shirt and black robes. They sneak more Gryffindor colours into the mix with iridescent thread that flashes red at the right angle.

The stylists spend a lot of time fiddling with that thread. They think they have the luxury of time. Harry doesn’t warn them. His grin just gets wider when their baffled attempts at his hair escalate into a desperate war.

“What is this magic?” she cries. “He’s not a metamorphmagus.”

No, perhaps the opposite. Metamorphmagi can look however they

please. Potters can only look scruffy. It means they can't slick his hair back a la Malfoy. Such a shame.

The best they can do is trim the sides and push his fringe away from his face. The result is, while not fashionable, deliberately tousled and roughish instead of a complete mess.

Harry looks mature and handsome. The gold shirt is a bit loud, but the outfit is simple enough for his tastes. He was worried he'd get a lot worse, considering his only reference for international competitions was the Quidditch World Cup and the dress code there seemed to be 'casual with a flair for the obnoxious'.

But then the stylists leave the shirt half open and add a lion jawbone necklace.

Harry sighs.

Thankfully, they've run out of things to inflict on him. They fit a wand holster in under his sleeve and aurors escort him to a large room. About half the champions are already there.

"Wow, Hermione," Harry says. "You look beautiful."

Hermione is in flowing red dress robes and her skin shines with gold glitter. Her hair is in an elaborate knot behind her head, pinned by – "Is that a lion skull?"

"Yes. All the range in the 12th century," she says snootily.

"BCE?" Harry asks.

She giggles and raises an eyebrow at the necklace and almost scandalously deep V of his shirt.

Harry shrugs and blushes. "Apparently I have a physique."

Their only solace is they're not the worst; Trelawney's glasses and feathers give the impression of a pop-eyed potoo rather than a mighty eagle. And no one was ever going to hold a candle to Fleur Delacour, anyway.

"You look fierce, Hermione. It suits you." It's a deep voice, and so smooth it runs down Harry's spine.

Harry turns around.

“Thank you. You look very fine, yourself, Tom,” Hermione says.

He smiles at her, then offers Harry his hand. “Tom Riddle. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

His expression and voice are affable, but being the focus of his attention has Harry’s hair standing on end.

“Harry Potter. And no, we haven’t.” *I would’ve remembered that.* Harry meets his eyes squarely and shakes his hand. Warm, strong, dangerous; he suppresses a shiver.

Harry agrees with Hermione – the stylists did good work. Riddle is in black robes with moving silver highlights that look like snake scales, over a tight green shirt that reveals more muscle definition than Harry would’ve expected. No cheesy snake skulls for him. The outfit enhances the broad shoulders and classically handsome features that make the Hogwarts girls giggle. It’s obvious now that they’re standing close, just how tall Riddle is.

“I must say, Hermione, I’m not surprised you were chosen. You really are the brightest witch of our age,” Tom says.

“Everyone who enters the Games is brilliant. Look at all the potions masters, spell crafters and curse breakers that’ve come out the other side. Just imagine how many more books and discoveries we would have if most didn’t die before they could complete their education.”

“Or are the survivors great because of their experiences? An argument could be made that the Games bring out their true potential, akin to pressure forming diamonds.”

“Champions are brilliant by definition. The reaping selects the most worthy. The Games skim the best off each generation.”

“Of course, but how much difference do you suppose there is between the best and second-best in each House? Probably not much usually, so regular school graduates are slightly less brilliant people but exist in far greater numbers, and yet victors are disproportionally distinguished later in life. How do you account for that?

“Attention. If every student had the opportunities and connections that are available to victors, many more witches and wizards would reach their potential.”

“So we agree, then; emerging as victor makes one more brilliant.”

Hermione scowls. Harry has to bite his lip to keep from grinning. She didn't walk into that, as much as she was cleverly and gracefully shoved.

Tom's eyes are dancing. Hermione rolls her eyes. Harry is accustomed to seeing that expression when he procrastinates on homework or Ron displays his bad table manners. Harry would bet several galleons that Tom does this to her often.

"You didn't need the Games to be brilliant, Tom. You would've made it regardless," Hermione says sadly. "Maybe it'd be harder, maybe it'd take longer, but you'd do it. Why would you volunteer to risk it all?"

Someone clears their throat. A well-dressed wizard stands by the doors. "Champions, line up with your partners. In a moment, you will open the dancing."

"Some risks are worth it." Tom bows and takes his leave. "Enjoy the ball."

The announcer looks over them brusquely. "Are you ready? Excellent."

The doors open, popping their silencing enchantments and Harry is briefly overwhelmed by the surge of music and conversation.

The room is enormous and almost as high as it is wide. It's larger than Hogwarts' Great Hall. It might be larger than the entire first floor. It's lit by a softly swirling, glowing mist that floats high above their heads and holds a full orchestra.

It's a long walk to the centre of the room. Omnioculars turn their way and buzz with interest. Hundreds of adults stand in a ring around the dance floor, staring, clapping, gossiping behind fans. They're not as boisterous as the groupies but they're just as nosy.

Harry shuffles uncomfortably.

Hermione puts her hand on his shoulder, steadying him. Then he remembers they're supposed to dance and belatedly grabs her waist.

"Don't look at your feet," Hermione reminds him. He lifts his eyes. "Face to face. Like we practised."

He remembers the plan: dance three songs together, mingle together, chat with sponsors, repeat.

Then they're off. The first few steps are tense, but when he doesn't immediately bollocks it up, Harry begins to relax. The first part of the plan being a success makes the rest seem achievable.

Fleur Delacour and Simon Boutin spin past. Boutin is a foot shorter and looks scared to touch her. Fleur doesn't seem to care about his feelings, or anyone else's. "Marble pillars in November. How tacky. There are bathrooms in our Ministry more elegant than this ballroom. And do not get me started on the food, the refreshments do not look any more appealing than that breakfast."

Harry raises his eyebrows. They both speak French. Would they not insult their hosts in a language they're less likely to understand?

Most of the other couples are silent. They don't seem as close as Harry and Hermione, but then, Harry has rarely seen friendships as close as theirs. They can talk about anything.

Harry idly wonders about the other outfits.

"Delacour and Boutin are in House Flamel. The red gems symbolise the Philosopher's Stone, Harry, *honestly*."

Hermione considers their competition.

"Hermione, I'm hallucinating. Bellatrix I'll-burn-the-room-down Black is letting a muggleborn touch her. She looks *happy*. I can't begin to imagine how Riddle won her over."

Riddle and Black are among the last champions on the dancefloor. They stay on as the number of dancing couples double after the opening song and move gracefully into the third. So Harry probably can't rely on them to kill each other and conveniently solve his two biggest problems.

Three dances are enough for now. Harry and Hermione make their way around the room, getting dragged into conversations and acting friendly. The other champions do the same. Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum are swarmed by admirers. Cedric Diggory is dragged around by his father doing the rounds of who's who. Bellatrix Black, beautiful in dark green snakeskin, doesn't need to be dragged anywhere, the peasants come to her. Stoeva is a surprise – she's soon charmed herself an audience. That Tom Riddle is also charming is not a surprise.

Harry and Hermione are scarcely clear of the dancefloor when they're ambushed.

“Mr Potter, Miss Granger. How are you this evening?” A man approaches them, a hand outstretched. “I am William Dorrington, investor and spell creator, perhaps you’ve heard of me.”

His smug air suggests they’d have better.

“I’m afraid I don’t keep up with the business world as much as I should,” Harry flashes a self depreciating smile. “Hermione is much better about such things.”

Harry is sure Hermione doesn’t know this bloke from Adam, but he can get away with implying otherwise if she’s quick.

She is. “I’m looking forward to whatever you think of next. What are you working on at the moment?”

“A nifty little communication device. Picture it! The wizarding wireless, but a two-way connection. Two people will be able to have a conversation at any distance.” Dorrington has the sales pitch prepared.

“It sounds very useful. I think you have another hit,” Hermione says. Dorrington is flattered.

“Indeed! It may even top the omnioculars!”

“Yes, the omnioculars – they are one of the most elaborately enchanted devices I’ve heard of. Quite fascinating,” Hermione says, genuinely excited. “I’ve been meaning to ask, how do they transmit the footage to the mirrors?”

“There is a very complicated runic array.”

“Certainly, but is there a Fourier transformation involved? That’s the only method I know of that may work, but I’ve only just started NEWT-level arithmancy.”

“I’m afraid that is a trade secret, my dear,” Dorrington says, shifty eyed.

Ah, Harry realises. Dorrington didn’t design them himself, he just gets the credit.

Which means Harry’s got to reign in Hermione’s enthusiasm before the self-inflating windbag starts to feel inadequate and defensive. He wants to brag so Harry will give him the opportunity.

“I brought some for the Quidditch World Cup. They were great,”

Harry says. “Can these ones do all the same things, with the zoom and playback and the like?”

“Of course, they can!”

Woops. A little more indignant than Harry was aiming for.

Hermione steps in with a smile. “Are people controlling it remotely or are the omnioculars enchanted to do it themselves?”

“The omniocular footage is transmitted to a control room, here in the Ministry, where employees determine what effects and commentary to use, and which footage to send onto the mirror network. There are many champions to keep track of, after all, and we can’t show it all at once! Don’t worry, though, we won’t let footage of you showering end up on every mirror in Europe,” Dorrington laughs.

But they’ll be *recording* that?

Harry tries not to look as uncomfortable as he feels. He needn’t worry – Dorrington is oblivious to any feelings beside his own.

“We won’t miss a moment of the action, don’t you worry about that! My omnioculars can pick up a whisper at forty paces and count ants on a Quidditch pitch. Televising all this is a very complicated endeavour, but it’s an important job. We must celebrate those who fight to better our society.”

“Of course,” Harry says weakly.

“Mr Dorrington. Champions. Good evening,” a voice cuts in. She is the first of a trio of old ladies. She is tall and bony. Harry is sure he’s seen her before. She’s got a face that for some reason screams stuffed vulture.

“Madam Longbottom,” Harry recognises her.

“Mr Potter. Neville’s told me all about you, of course. Yes, he speaks most highly of you both.”

“Neville is a good friend,” Hermione says.

“He says your quick thinking saves the potions classroom from violent redecoration every other week, Miss Granger.”

“Yes, well –”

Mrs Longbottom speaks very loudly and it's difficult to get a word in edgeways. "You, Potter, tutored seventh years in Defence when you were a mere fifth year. When Neville left, he could barely light his wand and by Christmas he could cast stunning spells. You worked with him once a week, he told me!"

"We did it together," Harry says looking at Hermione. "And it's a credit to Neville, really; he put all the work in practising."

"Don't be modest to save my grandson's reputation, he was truly hopeless. You worked a miracle. You increased his grade by two levels for his OWLs."

Harry gets the impression he's supposed to be grateful for this favour she's doing him.

Harry does not like Neville's grandmother.

A few hours later, and Harry can say with confidence that Hermione is the only witch in the room he can tolerate. But Hermione is off mingling and Harry has to do the same. He can't run away from the two young witches that've accosted him. He thought they'd let him go after he danced with the blond one – or was it the brunet? He doesn't remember. He knows they're rich; that seems to be all that matters around here.

He's had herbology projects with more personality.

"You must be very brave."

"Well, he is a Gryffindor, dear."

"You saw the reaping. You don't often get champions laughing in the face of death as if they encounter it every day."

"He looks like he might've."

"Very dashing. He looks the part of a victor already," she agrees. "Harry, dear. Tell us the story behind your scar."

Oh, Harry realises. *That's why the stylists didn't cover it.* It's intriguing. It makes him look like a victor.

Harry was seven. He remembers the ambush. He remembers his mum transfiguring a solid metal shield around him that sealed him in the dark just as the shrapnel hit. He remembers the horrible sounds

echoing around it like a drum. He remembers waiting inside and when his parents didn't answer his cries, the horrible *knowing*. Then knowing and waiting, with blood dripping into his eyes, for someone to let him out, unsure if it would be friend or foe.

"It's from the day my parents died," he says.

"But think of it this way; it's the day you survived."

"You think… I'm not looking at my parents' deaths… positively enough?" He blinks. Can they not fathom being grateful they saved him and sad they died? When you're that shallow, can you only have one emotion at a time?

"Oh, that's not it at all. You're so brave," she fans her face like she might cry. "You are an inspiration to me, Harry."

Sweet Merlin. Harry doesn't know if there's enough money in Britain to make this conversation worthwhile.

No, he can do this. He's put up with them this long and he'll be damned if he gets nothing out of it. He can schmooze if it means tricking these rich twits out of their money.

He can do this. "Thank you, that's kind of you to say."

"So brave. I feel what you're going through, and I just want you to know that we support you."

Harry thanks his lucky stars that he can't go ten minutes without someone new coming along demanding his attention.

He dances. He eats far too many tiny cakes. He tries to get these people to like him. He watches the two twits descend on Cedric, and Cedric charm them speechless, and resigns himself to not getting anything out of them, after all. There's nothing to do but keep trying.

And maybe take five minutes in a quiet spot.

But there's nowhere to truly hide.

An olive-skinned wizard approaches Harry. "Tired, Mr Potter?"

"Not at all," Harry lies. "Just taking a moment to watch the room. It's nice to see everyone enjoying themselves."

Even if that's not what Harry is paying attention to.

Trelawny has found a niche with the old ladies and appears to be reading their palms.

Amelia Bones is handling herself well, too, but she's got family to lean on and Cedric is keeping an eye on her. Harry hasn't needed to step in.

Krum is still swamped with people. He's clearly had a lot of training in working crowds; his popularity is going to be a problem.

"Do you dance, Mr Potter?" the wizard asks.

What kind of question is that? Oh, right. A leading question. A coy question inviting a coy reply.

Harry would rather not. He smiles, "If I know the name of my partner."

"I am Ignado Lorenzo," he says, offering his elbow.

Harry takes it. "Where are you from?"

"Valencia in Spain. A wonderful place, I've lived there all my life."

"I've heard it's beautiful." Harry has never heard of the city before, but the compliment can't hurt.

"It is. The architecture is some of the finest in Europe, in my slightly biased opinion, and it is framed in some of the bluest water in the world."

"Water comes in shades of blue?" Harry says lightly. "I thought it was supposed to be grey. Sometimes white. Depends how cold it is."

Lorenzo laughs. "You may not believe it until you see it with your own eyes."

Harry needs the break in the dance to think of a reply. "Maybe I will, when this is over. I could do some travelling."

"Is that what you would do with the prize money, then?"

"I haven't thought about it," Harry says. It's irrelevant. Harry won't get any prize money. The Ministry only hands it over if there's a sole victor and he'd rather die. But he can't say that. "It's still sinking in that I'm really here. Maybe you can give me ideas – what would you do with ten thousand galleons?"

“Twenty thousand. It’s a double, this year.”

“Oh, right.” The prize rolls over. If the Ministry doesn’t get enough murder, they up the incentive for next time. Great. “Now I need twice as much advice.”

“Well, a young lad like you might want the fastest broom on the market,” he chuckles like someone who has always owned everything they want. “But you’d have enough capital for a significant investment portfolio. I’m sure you’ve met people tonight who’ve shown you the benefit of that; make your money work for you and you’ll never have to work again.”

Yeah, Harry’s got a good picture. When they talk about how good the Games are for society, they mean profitable. These sponsors don’t make charitable donations to champions; they pay to have their names and brands associated with champions and on display all over Europe. It’s investment with just enough gambling to make it exciting; they’ll make more money the better their champion performs.

They’re making money on this blood sport. A lot of money.

“I’ll put some money aside for travelling and invest the rest,” Harry says.

“An excellent idea,” Lorenzo compliments… himself, basically.

Harry’s lips twitch.

Lorenzo smiles back. “You’d be famous as well. The Games are an excellent way to get into politics. Any aspirations?”

“It’s something I could see myself doing,” *in hell*. “Or I might go into teaching, instead.”

“Teaching, indeed?”

“I enjoy it. I’ve been tutoring Defence for a few years.”

Lorenzo makes an inquiring noise and Harry repeats the spiel for what must be the twentieth time tonight.

Merlin, adult conversations are dull.

Their dance ends close to where Hermione is talking about some complex spell theory with a group of academics. They look suitably impressed, so Harry doesn’t wait around too long before asking

Hermione for another dance.

There, at least, they can speak without people barging in, most of the time. They compare notes on their progress. Then they spend half a song listening to Narcissa Malfoy gloat about how many members the Black family have sacrificed to the Games since their previous victor, Eridanus Black in 1842, how much honour they've brought the family.

Harry meets Hermione's wide eyes and shakes his head. They're in perfect understanding – the Games are a whole different thing to these people.

"What time do you think it is?" Harry asks.

"Eleven or so."

Harry turns pleading eyes on her and Hermione laughs. "Still can't make the world turn faster, Harry."

"That's alright," Harry says. Just being around her has rejuvenated him. "Back to your nerds?"

"Yes."

"I'll get you a drink."

Chapter End Notes

Next up, one more chapter of the Ball and a lot more chemistry

Dance with the devil

Chapter Summary

I'd say the chapter title covers it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry's neck prickles. There's some ancient prey instinct that makes him turn.

Riddle is striding over. His long legs remind Harry how tight his own trousers are.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry is momentarily thrown, being addressed so familiarly by a Slytherin, let alone one he doesn't know.

"Riddle." Harry nods politely. It's all he can manage with his mouth suddenly dry.

"We didn't get a chance to speak earlier. I apologise for ignoring you."

"You and Hermione are friends. It's perfectly understandable." Harry can easily imagine them growing up, both too bookish and snooty to be popular with the other muggleborns and too proud to try to change to fit in. Theirs must be an abrasive friendship; they're both competitive and determined to be the smartest, but they have enough in common to find some solace in each other.

"It's not acceptable. I'd like to think I've developed better manners since I was a child," Riddle says ruefully. "Are you enjoying the evening?"

"More than I thought I would," Harry says, which is true only because he'd set the bar *that* low. He'd rather jump in a tub of rusty nails than spend another minute brownnosing. But people are listening, and those people want to believe they're above reproach.

"Ah, politics and plotting, it's not typically a Gryffindors' playground, but I expect there's enough risk in it to appeal to your courage."

There is that. It's certainly not boring. "As a Slytherin, I expect you're in your element."

"I do enjoy the intrigue," Riddle flashes a smile so perfect it must be manufactured. Harry wonders what natural response that's covering up. A grin showing too many teeth? Something closer to a sneer? Bloodthirsty, cold, smug?

From what Harry's seen, most Slytherins like the idea of toying with conversations and dazzling people with their wit. They want attention and recognition, and most think they're a dab hand at earning it. Harry's seen Malfoy swanning around lackies, enjoying the attention owed to him by birth and mistaking it for respect, and Harry wasn't impressed.

Harry doesn't know this game; not the rules, the players, the teams, the tactics or the tricks. But he knows how it's scored, and he's seen the points stacking up in the dazed witches and wizards Riddle leaves in his wake. Experienced politicians; natives and masters of this sport. They've been converted to admirers or so neatly tied in conversational knots that they're no longer an obstacle.

Harry has watched all the champions tonight. He doesn't need to know precisely how Riddle is doing it to recognise that he knows exactly what he's doing, he's doing it deliberately, and he's doing it better than all the other champions. Better than anyone in the room.

"Is it ever so easy you feel bad?" Harry wonders.

Riddle's lips fall into a languid grin. "What kind of Slytherin would I be if I neglected an unfair advantage?"

"Unfair? Sorry, no, I meant does it get boring?" Harry thinks of racing Malfoy to the snitch and Merlin is it satisfying, but he wonders how much better it would feel if the outcome wasn't inevitable and routine. "It's not fun if it's too easy. The thrill of a challenge – there's something in that."

Riddle stares at him and his head tilts to the side. Then he bows. "May I have this dance?"

Don't refuse any dances. Don't make any statements you don't know the meaning of. This is where those instructions collide. Dancing with Riddle has 'statement' written all over it. Refusing him does too. Harry has no idea which is worse, or if there's a better third option that he can't see. He does know that Snape is going to blame him for not

being omniscient enough to understand the nuance in the too-simple instructions.

Sod it. Harry is curious. “You may.”

Tom leads Harry to the dance floor and into a waltz. Harry has a brief moment to hope his hands aren’t sweaty and that his knees don’t shake, then he’s got too many other things to think about. Riddle’s hands are warm and large on him, and his face is far too close for comfort.

“I get the feeling you don’t like me much,” Riddle says.

Harry thinks of long legs and fear; that heart-pounding, stomach-swooping sensation when he’s diving for the snitch, pushing his broom faster and harder, at the limit of what he can pull up from, knowing a tiny mistake will mean a long stay in the hospital wing. And he thinks, *well, you’re part right.*

Harry swallows.

Riddle watches him with the same intense attention as at the selection ceremony. He’s staring like he doesn’t care who’s watching. Or so Harry would think if he didn’t know Riddle is too smart for that; everything is a performance.

“You’re very perceptive, Harry.” The cat says to the mouse: *you’ve spotted me, now what will you do?*

“I’m sorry, is your strategy to be overlooked?” Harry asks incredulously. It’s not that he thinks Riddle couldn’t do it, with the full force of pureblood conceit and ignorance on his side. They don’t want to believe a muggleborn could outshine Bellatrix Black or Viktor Krum. Riddle’s potential is blindingly obvious to Harry, but that doesn’t mean these people can tell the difference between arrogance and confidence when they’re so used to the former.

No, it’s not that handsome, charming, talented Riddle with his Head Boy badge and his record OWL scores is too impressive to be dismissed, it’s that Harry didn’t think he was trying to hide.

“Your opening move was to enthral a room of the pureblood elite.” Harry splutters. Whatever he told them was enough to impress them– Hermione hasn’t managed nearly so well and she’s trying. If Riddle is hiding, then he’s got more cards up his sleeves. He’s already the most dangerous champion and he’s *holding back*.

What a terrifying thought.

“They had to be convinced,” Riddle says. *You recognised it instantly*, Harry hears.

“Well, now I like you even less,” Harry says casually, hoping it will hide how his heart has cranked up another gear. Riddle can probably feel it pulsing in his fingers at this point.

“That’s too bad,” Riddle smirks. It strikes Harry as sincere. Riddle doesn’t care how Harry feels about him, and judging by the rest of the conversation, he doesn’t care what Harry knows about his plans either. As if Harry has no bearing on the outcome, no chance of derailing it. Considering Riddle’s plan must be to win, and Harry is an opponent, Harry thinks he should be insulted. But Harry’s reaction to a challenge is about as unhealthy as his reaction to fear.

The song ends and Harry assumes that their conversation has, too. Riddle decides he’s not done with Harry.

“You impressed Slughorn, you know,” Riddle says in the beat between songs, and then they’re spinning again. Riddle is a good dancer; as confident in this as everything else. He leads, and the commands in his movements are so clear that even Harry looks graceful following. They’re attracting attention. Yeah – subtle, Riddle is not.

Harry, who is quite sure he hasn’t met anyone named Slughorn, but less sure why Riddle is bringing it up, raises a questioning eyebrow.

“Slughorn has an eye for spotting people with potential. Anyone with a lick of sense knows it. He’s identified you as one of the key players. His endorsement will attract the attention of many sponsors.”

Harry thinks for a moment. “Do you consider yourself a man with a lick of sense? Or do more sensible people form their own opinions?”

Riddle grins. It’s sharp, and the closest thing to an honest expression so far. “Of course, more sensible people form their own opinions, but in some cases, their superior opinions do align with those with merely a lick of sense.”

In Gryffindor they would’ve just said ‘yes, I am snooping because Slughorn thinks you’re alright and now so do I’ and got on with the day. No wonder Slytherins never have any time for fun.

Unless this *is* what Slytherins do for fun. Riddle seems to be enjoying

it. There's a curiosity in his eyes that implies Harry is not what he expected. At some point, attention upgraded to curiosity. Harry might be grinning a bit, too. He will admit this verbal sparring is thrilling. Mildly.

"It sounds like you know him," Harry says. It's a bit of a guess, based largely on the assumption that Riddle is competent enough to know everyone as important as this Slughorn bloke seems to be.

The gleam in Riddle's eyes suggests it is a good guess.

"Indeed, I do," he says. The song is more upbeat than the last and calls for another spin. When they come back together, Riddle says, "Come now. You've kept pace in our conversation thus far. This is the part when you ask me for an introduction."

It would be patronising if it weren't so teasing.

Harry replies in kind. "But I've made such a good impression from afar."

Harry doesn't think it matters what he says. In the end, Riddle is going to do as he pleases. If Harry asks, Riddle will just attach a price to it.

Riddle laughs, and this time it is patronising.

They segue naturally from dancing to walking side by side. For Harry, it's another step guided by Riddle's hand on his back. But then he realises who they're approaching, and that hand feels like it's pushing him to the gallows.

Slughorn is enormously fat and bald, with a fitting walrus moustache, and he seems like a friendly man. But he isn't the problem.

"Your work on emulsifying solutions was revolutionary, Severus, I'm certain Master Kahl will be thrilled to collaborate with you. What's this? Tom, hello again, you look like you've been having a ball!"

Riddle laughs politely at the joke. Harry is almost convinced, but the fingers on his back twitch. "Good evening, Professor Slughorn, Professor Snape."

Harry tries to convey with his eyes how much this wasn't his idea. Snape responds with the Look that always preludes detention. With a thrill, Harry realises Snape can't give him detentions anymore. Which does beg the question: without that avenue for punishment, what will

Snape do instead?

“Professor, may I introduce Harry Potter, Gryffindor Champion. Harry, this is Professor Horace Slughorn; potions master, champion trainer and soul of the party.”

Trainer?

Slughorn's eyes glitter with interest. “Harry, just the man I was hoping to see! How are you enjoying the evening?”

“It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“You know, that’s almost exactly what your mother said to me,” Slughorn says a little sadly.

“You knew my mother?” Harry blinks.

“Oh yes, both your parents, but your mother especially. She and Severus spent a lot of time at my training station.”

Snape’s face is blank. Harry gets the feeling he wants to assign Slughorn detention, too.

“Lily had a real skill for potions, why, she picked up techniques faster than some of the seventh years, and she was just OWL age, herself. James was bright, as well.”

“As a candle in a hurricane,” Snape mutters tartly.

Slughorn chuckles, “You can’t deny the man was creative, Severus. And how handy that was in the arena! You’re following their footsteps, eh Harry? You’ll do them proud I expect, maybe do one better than they managed and emerge as the victor!”

Harry smiles weakly. He’s pretty sure his parents would be happier if he was nowhere near the Games.

“I hear you excel at Defence Against the Dark Arts, and Minerva says you have your father’s skill with Transfiguration,” Slughorn says. Riddle’s eyes bore into the side of Harry’s head. “That talent combined with your parents’ spirit, well!”

“Luckily, I have Professor Snape to keep me modest.” Harry mentally docs twenty points from Gryffindor for having a sense of humour in a professor’s presence. Snape was already going to torment him, so Harry figures he might as well do something to deserve it.

Sure, Harry. Keep digging.

Slughorn laughs. “Oh, I know Severus is a harsh judge! I’ll have to see for myself.”

“Are you training again this year?” Harry hazards a guess. He’s got the vague idea that this training involves the arena preparation that Hermione mentioned.

“I am, I am. This will be my ninth Games, I can scarcely believe it!”

Riddle smiles. “An impressive stretch. Most of the mentors here owe their lives to you. I am glad you decided to return. I know we’ll be in good hands with a trainer of your expertise.”

Slughorn preens. “Naturally, naturally.”

“By the way, is the Minister here? I was hoping to meet him.”

“No, my boy, I’m afraid you may not get the chance. A shame, really. He’ll often make an appearance at these events but there was a busy cabinet session earlier, so I am not surprised–”

“I faced off against the whole duelling club and I won!”

“Well, *I* fought a hippogriff.”

“I could fight a hippogriff with my bare hands – I’m a rhinoceros animagus!”

A nearby conversation is suddenly too loud to ignore. Heads turn and lips curl at the commotion.

Two of the Durmstrang boys, Bronner and Romanov, are standing chest to puffed-up chest. Romanov is tugging at this sleeve and his frustration suggests he’s just figured out the holsters are designed to lock their wands away. Thus prevented from firing curses, he looks like he’s considering proving his animagus claim.

Harry is baffled. Have they cracked under the pressure already? They’re embarrassing themselves and giving away critical information.

Then Harry’s eye is drawn past them, to the sparkly red stones on Fleur Delacour’s dress. Harry is immediately hit with the urge to put those guys in their place. Hippogriff? That’s nothing. He escaped a whole nest of acromantulas. He can cast a patronus. His animagus form can fly. He has a *Firebolt*.

He shakes his head. No, what is he thinking? Snape will kill him, and then Riddle will *actually* kill him.

Riddle is probably an animagus too and it'll surely be way cooler and could eat Harry in one bite. That'd impress Fleur. She seems like that kind of girl.

Riddle turned away from the spectacle when Harry jerked and is once again watching him with that curious and amused glint.

Harry manages to tear his gaze away from Fleur to keep one wary eye on him.

"Mr Potter," Snape says. Snape has his wand subtly in his sleeve, prepared to hex Harry silent, or worse. It's harder to care about than it should be. Harry splits his attention three ways. Snape and Riddle look completely unaffected by the angel in their midst. Are they blind? "I believe Miss Granger is looking for you," Snape says, but he clearly means *get out of my sight before I add your organs to my collection*.

Harry looks around. Hermione is across the ballroom in the opposite direction from Fleur. Fleur has a lot of men around her, Harry will need to get closer to catch her attention.

But Snape is not bluffing. He's probably wanted to harvest Potter organs since his own Games.

"It was nice meeting you, Professor Slughorn. Thanks for the dance, Riddle," Harry says. He tries for a polite nod to his mentor, but his anger shows in the tension.

He turns stiffly and heads for Hermione. Snape is sending him away so he can impress Fleur himself. Harry almost stumbles at the idea of Snape chasing skirt. Ew, gross. That is going to haunt him.

"Make way, Potter," Roger Davies says. "Hey, Fleur, I'm a potions genius!"

Harry speeds up. By the time he reaches Hermione, he's back to resenting Snape just for the usual reasons and he thinks the madness has passed.

Hermione is frowning at the commotion. It's louder now that Roger Davies and some of the miscellaneous socialites have joined the dick-measuring contest. "Harry, what's going on over there?"

She takes a few steps like she means to check it out.

“Bad idea,” Harry tells her. He grabs Hermione’s hand and detours to the farthest refreshment table.

This party is too posh for butterbeer. Depressing. Water it is.

“Are they fighting over Fleur Delacour?”

“Yes,” Harry says when he can breathe again. “It’s her allure. Potent stuff. She’s got them bragging all their secrets, proving they can’t resist her – huge weakness. And this is the perfect place to ruin their standing with the sponsors. Very clever, really.”

“But you resisted?” Hermione says, looking at Harry like he’s a homework assignment. “Harry, describe how she looks.”

At this distance, she no longer looks like the girl of his dreams. She’s a bit of a snob and she’s going to try to kill them soon. Harry thinks those qualities are a bit more important to consider in a partner.

“Er… very pretty? She’s got nice skin. Shiny hair suits her way better than Malfoy. Her face is… striking? Pleasant, when she doesn’t look like she’s smelt something horrid.” Harry is worried he’s failing this quiz.

“Now, describe Cedric Diggory.”

“Well, everyone knows he’s handsome – that jawline and face and whatnot. Much more attractive attitude. Warm smile. Nice eyes. His hair looks soft.”

Hermione looks at him meaningfully.

Harry raises an eyebrow.

“Pretty, shiny, striking. Handsome, warm, soft,” Hermione repeats.

Harry’s other eyebrow joins its twin on his forehead.

If Hermione has only just noticed he’s also attracted to men, she’s off her form. Harry realised that at approximately a quarter past Riddle-in-tailored-trousers o’clock.

“We’ll speak later,” Hermione says.

Excellent. That would coincide with the sexuality crisis he’s

postponing. How efficient.

Hermione does a quick scan of the room. “Judging by how many people are not losing their minds, there must be a way to defend against the allure. Until we find out, we’d better keep our distance.”

“Absolutely.”

“Come with me. There’s an old noble that I couldn’t make much of a connection with. I think you’ll have more luck. All he wants to talk about is Quidditch.”

…

The Ball doesn’t last much longer. The crowd starts thinning out around midnight. The Champions, as the guests of honour, are some of the last permitted to leave.

“Potter. With me,” Snape orders.

“Yes, sir?” Harry wonders with trepidation. “Should we get Hermione?”

“Do you need her to tuck you into bed?”

Harry flushes and says nothing.

Snape stops in front of a door. It opens with a flick of his wand.

“Your room,” Snape says in a voice that heavily implies *leave it at your peril*. “Can I trust that you started no fires tonight in need of my immediate attention?”

“What?” Oh, social faux pas. Well, he didn’t call anyone a bigot or raise his voice or literally set anyone on fire. Not everyone liked him, but no one stormed away. “I don’t think so.”

Snape conveys an enormous amount of doubt with a single eyebrow. Then he turns on his heel and billows his way back down the corridor.

“Goodbye to you, too,” Harry mutters.

It’s a large ensuite bedroom. Luxurious, but clinically so. There’s no colour or decorations, except a portrait of an old wizard who is watching his every move.

Harry checks the draws first. There’s a set of pyjamas and a set of

robes, presumably for tomorrow.

He struggles out of the dress robes. It takes a while, being almost as difficult as he'd feared. His wand is still locked in the holster. He feels unsafe, knowing he can't use it if he needs to, knowing he's surrounded by people that want him dead. Keeping it close in the holster is cold comfort, but it's all he's got. He can't bear to take it off.

He jumps in the shower. The hot water washes off the makeup and the greasy feeling from schmoozing with unpleasant people and rubbing shoulders with perfectly nice people who benefit from this twisted system at the expense of everyone else. He stays under the spray until his eyelids start to droop.

The pyjamas fit perfectly. Creepy.

Harry collapses into the bed. It's too squishy. He expects to be tossing and turning for hours, overanalysing the image of Tom Riddle in those trousers and reinterpreting a number of his previous relationships. That fluttery feeling around Oliver Wood suddenly makes a lot more sense. It's all tangled up in gratitude and professional admiration, but did he really think he was just nervous about letting his captain down?

Harry only has a minute to feel a bit foolish before he falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

> I've never written romance before, and while we're a long way off from squishy feelings stage, I'd appreciate feedback. Please let me know what parts of their dynamic are working or not working.
>
> Next chapter we get back to Hogwarts-turned-training-centre and meet one of the main villains.

Home sweet home

Chapter Summary

Champions return to Hogwarts for training before the arena

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry wakes groggy from too little sleep. There's no breakfast in the room, no clock or window, and the portrait responds to his questions in Greek.

Harry dawdles through his morning routine. He stares uncertainly at the door. No one has come to fetch him. He's not sure if he's allowed to leave. But he figures if he wasn't, they would've locked the door. He tries the handle.

An auror in purple robes is waiting in the hall. She gestures for Harry to follow. She leads Harry through the warren of the Ministry and they don't see anyone else in the halls. He flexes his wand hand to feel the pressure from the holster straps. His death isn't scheduled for a few months, but that doesn't mean any number of unpleasant things can't head his way before then.

Harry's unease feels prophetic when he's left in a sitting room with Professor Snape. He is reading today's newspaper – if the owls have done the rounds it must be midmorning at least.

Snape flicks his eyes at the breakfast buffet but otherwise ignores Harry. When the expected vitriol doesn't come immediately, Harry fills a plate.

It'd be just like Snape to let the anticipation add to the punishment.

Harry sits opposite his mentor. The front page brightly exclaims about the ball above a large picture of Bellatrix Black dancing with Gilderoy Lockhart.

The Ministry has a clear favourite champion. Their nationalism is showing.

Harry has deciphered the first paragraph around Snape's fingers by the time Hermione and Professor McGonagall join them. They've both

eaten already.

“You both performed admirably, last night,” Professor McGonagall says. “We could not have asked for more.”

“Perhaps the discretion not to conduct private conversations in public ballrooms,” Snape says with a note of amusement at their expense. Snape deftly flips the paper to the gossip columns. The drama stirred up by Fleur Delacour features heavily. **Who Will Win Her Heart?** Below, there is a bold subheading. **Potter Heir Resists Part-Veela!**

Is Harry Potter in a committed relationship with friend and fellow champion, Hermione Granger? Or has someone else caught Mr Potter’s eye? Does he wave his wand for the other team?

When Fleur Delacour turned up the charm, Harry Potter fled to his long-time friend, Hermione Granger. Their rapport was displayed for all to see at the Reaping Ceremony, we all know something is there, but sources close to the pair disagree on the extent of the relationship. Was Mr Potter seeking relief in the familiar, or is there something more to their friendship, something more powerful than veela allure? Is this a tantalising secret relationship they’ve kept even from their closest friends? In any case, Mr Potter will have competition for her attention. Miss Granger and Bulgarian star, Viktor Krum, got awfully cosy on the dancefloor.

Or perhaps, Mr Potter is immune because his tastes lie in a more masculine direction. The course of the ball took an unexpected turn when Harry Potter and Slytherin Tom Riddle took to the dance floor. Between those two flew more sparks than Ollivanders’ wand shop before September. We will keep you updated on this exciting new development. Time will tell if Mr Potter follows the family tradition of finding his sweetheart in the arena.

Harry’s brain short-circuits. Nope. Not having That conversation now. Not with Snape of all people. “Viktor Krum?”

Hermione – bless her – runs with the tangent. “We got talking about arithmancy. He’s very smart. It was an enjoyable conversation.”

Snape takes their nice subject change and tosses it out the window. “Speaking with Tom Riddle was foolish. He is incredibly intelligent, with a knack for ferreting out peoples’ deepest secrets. He is undoubtedly the most dangerous thing you will face in the arena. What did you say to him?”

“What you just said, pretty much,” Harry says. “I accused him of being

scary as hell. He admitted to being even scarier and hiding it."

Snape raises an eyebrow.

Harry shrugs. "I think he was just curious. About how I saw through it. He didn't ask about our plans or anything, didn't seem threatened at all by me spotting him."

"Hmm. He hasn't completely dismissed you as a threat."

"Slughorn's endorsement caught his attention," Harry says.

"Yes, and then you let him wander over and find out exactly why."

"He could've asked a dozen people and heard the same thing," Harry points out.

"A dozen rumours," Snape counters. "Or the truth spelt out on your face. He was watching your reactions."

"Ah," Harry realises, that does make sense.

Snape flicks to the next page of the paper. Professor McGonagall reaches for a pile of gossip rags; takes one for herself and passes another to Hermione. Hermione takes it gingerly between two fingers. Harry doesn't know what her problem with it is – at least the rags don't pretend to be real journalism.

"Waiting for the rest of us to do all the work, Potter?" Snape says.

Harry blinks. What work?

McGonagall says, "These papers and the broadcasts are the Ministry's voice. This is the last glimpse of the reporting we get until the tournament is over."

"Their aim is to shape public approval," Snape says. "Do not underestimate the power of editing. The Ministry control the narrative. You cannot control how they portray you." Harry must look sceptical, because Snape scowls. "They could interview you for half an hour and only project thirty seconds of your vacant expression after a simple question they asked someone else. You could have an excellent duel and they might show a few moves when you stumble. They could make you sound unhinged by taking a sarcastic remark out of context."

Dread drips down Harry's spine. McGonagall is grim. "The selective

editing is much worse during training, where they have full schedules for twenty-four champions to condense into one hour of highlights on the mirrors and a few columns in the morning paper. The arena is broadcast live, all day – they cannot cut as much out. But by the time you reach the arena, they will have had months to establish a caricature of you."

Snape flicks the paper shut. "If they want to paint an unflattering picture, they will have all the ammunition they could ever need. Do not give them incentive to use it. Parrot the party line: the Games are good; you want to be the sole victor; sacrifice is noble."

Harry blanches. He can't do that. It hits him on some visceral level. He cannot justify echoing heinous lies just so that the Ministry paint him in flattering colours and make more people like him. The best Harry can do is not actively criticise the Ministry. Maybe not even that – keeping silent about things he knows are wrong is not his strong suit.

Hermione, next to him, is puffed up with indignation. This won't be easy for either of them.

"Miss Black and Mr Krum are the favourites. Do not confront them, or the Ministry will build you up as a rival or a nuisance for them to vanquish," Snape says.

"The verdict on you two seems to be that you are interesting. While they believe this, they will not sabotage your portrayal too badly," McGonagall says.

"I give it a week," Snape says. He ignores the look McGonagall shoots him. "You have until you irritate the Ministry to show the sponsors you are not entirely incompetent."

"During training?" Harry guesses. "What is that exactly?"

Hermione shifts to the front of her seat.

Snape pre-emptively glares her to silence.

Professor McGonagall, who's never had much patience for childishness, speaks up. "Training is the next part of the process. At Hogwarts, you will work with masters in various fields for specialised instruction. We will also work with you personally. Miss Granger, I've heard of your use of bird conjuring spells in confrontations– I approve. Transfiguration is an incredibly powerful tool in a duel; I will give you some pointers. Professor Snape will teach you both Occlumency to

resist the veela allure."

"When do we start?"

"Portkeys are scheduled for Hogwarts this afternoon. Official training begins early tomorrow. Occlumency lessons start now," Snape says.

He draws his wand.

Harry blanches. He looks to McGonagall but she doesn't interfere.

"Occlumency is the art of protecting the mind against magical manipulation. I will attempt to break into your mind. We are going to see how well you resist. Brace yourself however you see fit. Legilimens!"

– "James Potter, get that broomstick off the table!" Lily turning, hair flashing, Harry giggling – "Confringo!" "Harry!" metal flying in all directions – Uncle Remus, white-knuckled on the couch, staring at the magic mirror. Harry, nervously, "Game? What game? Is it like hide and seek – is that why they're in the woods?" – Uncle Sirius grabbing his shoulders, "Concentrate, Harry. You're ready. You can do it." Harry shifting, shrinking, further than expected, to a tiny size, spreading his wings – "Expecto patronum! Ugh, I'm never going to get this." – Ginny leaning in for an awkward kiss – "Do you consider yourself a man with a lick of sense?" Riddle's answering grin, sharp cutting –

Harry is slumped in the chair, panting. A sudden headache flares behind his eyes.

Ah, there's the revenge Harry was waiting for.

Snape spares him a scathing look and then turns his wand on Hermione. Harry flinches.

"Legilimens!"

Hermione stiffens for a long minute. Snape lowers his wand and she collapses back and takes deep, shuddering breaths.

Snape curls his lips. "Were you even trying to resist?"

Hermione is shaken. Piling scorn and academic criticism on top of the shock is not helping.

"How'd I do?" Harry draws Snape's attention back.

“Abysmally. We will be starting from rock bottom. Occlumency is a matter of willpower. Clear your mind. You shouldn’t find it very difficult.”

That is definitely a dig at Harry’s intelligence, rather than a comment on the ease of the act. Harry doesn’t even know what a clear mind would entail – not thinking? Picturing an empty white void?

His mind is still swirling when Snape raises his wand.

“Hold on, what am I supposed to do?”

“Focus. Reassert control. Legilimens!”

– “I’m Ron, by the way. Ron Weasley.” – “The barrier is sealed somehow.” “Maybe we should wait by the car.” “The car!” – howling and barking and his uncles are having fun down in the basement. Harry tries the handle, but it’s magically locked – “Troll! In the dungeons!” “Hermione! She doesn’t know!” –

“Is there a reason you want me to know all the inane details of your relationships?” Snape asks.

“Is there a reason you’re looking?”

“Legilimens!”

*– A letter. ‘The aurors are after me on trumped-up charges. I have to run. I’m sorry, Harry. Uncle Reggie is going to step up for you. The Ministry won’t let Moony adopt you officially, but we’ll always be there for you. I’m hiding in-’ – “Why do you need a safe house, Sirius?” “I’ve pissed off a few people. Don’t worry about me. It’s like a holiday, nice and sunny, here. I’m heading to-” – an owl lands with a huge package. The note is more precious than anything inside ‘Happy birthday Harry! I’ll see you soon. Meet me at the place where I showed you-’ –*Getoutstoplooking*– a big black shape charges across the Great Hall –*Don’takehimfromme*– *Riddle, pulling him close, stomach swooping, Harry is staring down a nundu – Bellatrix Black smiling “Better watch your back, mudblood” –*

“Your emotions are so obvious they’re providing a guided tour to your mind,” Snape says. There’s less scorn than before.

Harry glares at him. Snape was looking for Sirius’ location. He got a lot, but he didn’t get that.

“Miss Granger. Prepare yourself.”

“Is there a book, or –”

“Occlumency is a skill, like duelling or flying. You cannot learn it from a book. It is strengthened by practice, discipline and exposure. By the time either of you naturally build resistance to the veela allure you will be six feet under. Legilimens!”

Harry doesn’t know how long it’s been when Professor McGonagall puts a stop to the practice, but by then the light feels like it’s stabbing straight into his brain.

A dozen aurors enter and fan out around the room. Harry and Hermione freeze. A woman steps forward. Her robes are marked with gold trim – she’s highly ranked. She’s holding a length of rope. “You have five minutes.”

Harry squints at it and quickly shuts his eyes because now he’s a least mostly sure he’s not being arrested. “A portkey, really?”

He’s going to be sick across half of Briton.

“Take a headache potion,” Professor McGonagall says and hands them each a vial.

Hermione pops the cork and wastes no time. She sits, massaging her forehead as the pain dissipates.

Harry turns the vial over. Ministry labelling. Snape didn’t brew this. Figures. He would’ve enjoyed seeing Harry sick, as long as none of it got on him. “We’re not taking the train back?”

“There’s no parade to greet you in Hogsmeade. The theatre would be wasted on you,” Snape says.

“One minute,” the auror with the portkey says. Half of the aurors get a handhold. The rest stay back, wands drawn. They’re not going to be able to escape by staying here. Harry and Hermione grab on and wait.

The potion works quickly. When the portkey activates, Harry is merely incredibly disoriented. He and Hermione fall heavily on their backs in the grass. Snape taps his foot and glares like they’re lounging around on purpose.

Harry straightens his glasses and looks around. They’re beside the road to Hogsmeade, just outside the Hogwarts gates. Surrounded by more aurors. Joy.

“Thirty seconds before the Hufflepuffs land on you, Potter. But take your time.”

Harry scrambles to get up and hurries towards the castle because Snape isn’t waiting.

Sure enough, there’s a flash behind them. Cedric Diggory, Amelia Bones, Professor Flitwick and Newt Scamander land outside the gates.

A minute and two portkeys later, there’s a crackle and power builds in the air. Hermione’s hair stands on end.

Harry stops halfway up the hill and turns. Pressure rises in his ears, and just when he thinks they’re going to pop, a translucent dome snaps into place around the castle and grounds.

They’ve activated the Hogwarts wards. The faint hope for escape Harry didn’t realise he harboured, fizzles and dies.

Nothing for it, now. They’re trapped. Harry turns back up the hill and keeps walking.

…

The Great Hall is still set up with four House tables, but the colours and banners are gone. Champions and mentors from all schools mix and spread out between tables. It’s beyond weird to see Headmaster Dumbledore perched like an attentive student in fluorescent robes. Everyone is equal, except of course the Ministry officials.

“Professors, who are the people with Bartimus Crouch at the head table?” Hermione asks.

Snape looks down his nose. Evidently, this features alongside the ingredients to the Draught of Living Death in his list of things everyone should be born knowing. He deigns to enlighten them, “Cornelius Fudge, Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes. Walden Macnair, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Dolores Umbridge, Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

His lip curls at the last, a small woman in pink.

The Goblet of Fire sits in front of them, the same position as the Reaping Ceremony. The blue flames show their faces in an unflattering light.

“Hem hem.”

People look around and eyes eventually settle on Umbridge. She’s so short, it’s hard to tell that she stood to get their attention.

Umbridge smiles broadly – far more broadly than anyone should. It stretches ear to ear across her wide face. She looks like a toad.

“Good evening, mentors and champions,” she says in a voice that would be more fitting in a kindergarten. “I am High Inquisitor Umbridge. That means I’m in charge of day-to-day life in the castle. I’ll be checking that everyone is training and behaving themselves. So that brings us to the rules. No one may come or go until the Games are complete. The wards are up, so anyone who tries will have a very unpleasant time of it.”

Umbridge giggles.

Hermione stares at her, appalled.

Harry watches Snape because there might be someone he hates more than Harry and that is fascinating.

“Training starts at eight tomorrow, so you had better get up bright and early. Breakfast will be served in the Great Hall from seven. Lunch is at twelve. Dinner is at six. There is no curfew. The library is open all hours. The spell range on the third floor is open all hours. All other training rooms are open from seven in the morning to seven in the evening. Magic is strictly forbidden outside of official practice locations. Trainers will unlock your wands when you enter a training room, and you will return your wands to your holsters when you leave. Other weapons may not leave the practice rooms. Of course, champions are not permitted to harm each other – you’ll have plenty of time for that later! The hospital wing is open all hours, but if you follow these rules no one should need it. These measures are put in place for your safety. All liberties are conditional on good behaviour. Restrictions will be put in place if you cannot be trusted.”

Liberties. Harry snorts. As the Ministry dangles access to their magic in front of them, trying to pretend it’s a carrot when it’s clearly a whip.

We own you. We own your magic. You will jump when and where we say. You are in a fight to the death, and you will hold your fire until we tell you to unleash it.

He clenches his fists. His plate rattles.

Snape eyes him. “See if accidental magic counts. Test her, please. Make my day.”

“Mentors and staff will reside in Ravenclaw Tower. Beauxbatons champions will live in the Hufflepuff dorms. Durmstrang champions will be staying in the Slytherin dungeons. Hogwarts champions will relocate to Gryffindor Tower. You will each have a room warded to prevent any other champions entering, for your peace of mind.”

“We’re rooming with Bellatrix Black,” Hermione realises faintly.

Harry desperately hopes Black is bound by the same rules and she can’t use her wand either. He’s not sure how deep the corruption and favouritism go.

After dinner, the Hogwarts champions follow their escort and Harry is carefully considering how to slip away to the Room of Requirement to get backup wands for him and Hermione, just in case Bellatrix kicks off.

Hermione is whispering about getting books from the library. Harry nods along but he’s not really listening until: “Tom already knows wandless magic, he’s got such an advantage.”

“Tom Riddle can do wandless magic,” Harry stops dead in his tracks. The group continues without them. That’s fine. Helpful, actually. “How much?”

Hermione looks miserable. “Little things, when we were kids. Summoning. Levitating. Controlling animals. He once got a hoard of rats to run off with all of Justin Finch-Fletchley’s clothes when he teased us.”

That’s already worrying. Disarm him in the arena and he can summon his wand or drop a rock on their heads. More immediately, it doesn’t take much to help someone trip down the stairs and no wand makes a pretty good alibi.

“And since then?” Harry dreads the answer.

“I don’t know. I was jealous and angry that he got to go to Hogwarts while I was stuck at the orphanage for another year. I threatened to tell on him for breaching the Underage Restriction of Magic. We’ve never been as close, since. He stopped showing me his tricks, but I’m

sure that didn't stop him from doing it."

Wandless magic. Harry wouldn't have even thought of it. But it's the perfect solution, isn't it? Spare wands are a quick fix now, but what do you do in the arena if you're disarmed or that fragile piece of wood snaps?

"Yeah. Better get those books later," Harry says. "Come on, we've got to catch up."

Luckily, they know where they're going and all the secret shortcuts. They arrive at the portrait of the Fat Lady just in time to hear the password.

"Boys are on the left, girls on the right. Your rooms are labelled. Good afternoon," the auror says but he doesn't leave. He takes a post beside the portrait hole.

"*This* is what passes for a common room in Gryffindor?" Bellatrix Black sneers.

Great. She's in a mood.

Tom Riddle does not look impressed by the small, bright space, either. "It's a bit garish."

The common room has never felt small, before, even with fifty Gryffindors throwing a party. Busy, yes. But suddenly throw in an auror and eight teenagers, six who don't belong, two of which have very large and prickly presences, and it's cramped.

The omnioculars don't help. They circle like vultures. A dopy looking one keeps bumping into the walls and a tapestry swats at it like it's a fly. Harry's skin crawls with the idea of thousands of eyes watching them, entertained by this reality show.

Cedric walks to one of the large windows. "I like it. It's cosy. Reminds me of the Hufflepuff rooms, but with a view."

Amelia Bones shyly agrees.

"No one asked, pufflet," Bellatrix jeers.

A rebuke comes from a very unexpected quarter. "You have dark things in your future," Trelawney says.

Bellatrix grins savagely. "Darling, I am the dark thing that happens to

other people."

Trelawney shrinks back. "I've Seen it. There are difficult times ahead of you all!"

Roger Davies rolls his eyes. "Thank Merlin for divination. I would never have guessed."

"The only thing difficult about these Games will be deciding who to kill first," Bellatrix says.

"Charming," Hermione mutters to Harry. "I'm going to the library. Meet you back here in a few?"

"Sure."

Harry dawdles around the common room to make sure Bellatrix doesn't follow Hermione. He doesn't have to wait long. The champions are either curious to see their rooms or keen on the solitude. It's early in the afternoon – no one is sleeping. A few more threats and posturing, then Bellatrix goes to her room, and Harry goes to his.

It's further up the stairs than his previous dorm. It's familiar and completely jarring. There isn't room for Ron, Neville, Dean or Seamus. They're just cut out. Harry's bed sits in the middle. There's a large desk where Ron should be. A wardrobe on Seamus's side. It's full of various outfits; exercise, formal, casual, all grey with the Ministry crest, in richer fabric than Harry's ever bothered with. There's a trunk at the foot of the bed. It's not Harry's trunk.

He flips it open. Shoes, belts, vials full of muscle relaxants and such things that come in handy after a hard Quidditch practice. He digs through it without care.

Then he checks the wardrobe, the desk, under the bed.

His things aren't there. He doesn't have Sirius's two-way mirror and enchanted penknife. His photo album. Dad's invisibility cloak. The Marauder's Map. His Firebolt. His mokeskin pouch. Sneakoscope. Vault key. Weasley jumpers. The charmed DA coin. His spells books, his class notes –Hermione is going to have an aneurysm– he doesn't even have a quill.

He does have a minor panic attack.

Harry clatters down to the common room in a blur.

Tom is already there, speaking to the auror. By the sound of it, he's tried reasoning and politeness and isn't having much luck. Harry has a bit more weight to throw around and he's angry enough to try it.

Harry stops at Riddle's side. "The Ministry can confiscate family heirlooms now?"

The auror stiffens at the insult. "We, of course, regulate items that may be dangerous or give champions an unfair advantage."

"And which category do photo albums fall into?" Harry glares.

The auror says, "As I was telling this gentleman; your belongings will be returned to you or your next of kin at the end of the Games."

"We'll see," Riddle says. His voice is ice cold.

There's a moment where Harry forgets Riddle is his enemy. A moment of perfect understanding and synchrony of thought; the same fury, aimed at the same people, over irreplaceable possessions.

"What's going on?" Hermione says, stepping through the portrait hole with books in her arms.

"The Ministry is graciously holding all our belongings," Riddle says.

"My notes!"

Harry was right: aneurysm. Maybe a stroke.

Then Harry has an idea and he reaches for his wand before he remembers he can't use it to cast as much as a basic privacy spell.

"Come with me," Harry says.

Hermione places the books on a table and hurries out the common room after him. The portraits watch them curiously and mindful of their listening ears, Harry heads for the nearest secret corridor. Then, remembering the bragging about how well omnioculars can pick up whispers, he walks even further in.

He's mildly surprised when Riddle steps in after Hermione. Riddle leans against the wall, hands in pockets. He knows he wasn't invited but is willing to use Harry's imprecise instructions against him.

Harry could argue on principle, but they're on the same side of this fight, anyway.

"Dobby!"

The elf pops in front of Harry, twisting his ears nervously. "Harry Potter, sir! Miss Hermione Granger! Yous is in grave danger. These Games is being bad for young witches and wizards!"

"We know, Dobby. We'll do what we can."

"What can Dobby do for yous? We elves is being forbidden from interfering with tasks, but this is not tasks yet," Dobby says slyly. He is the master of loopholes.

Harry smiles. "Do you know where our trunks are?"

Dobby's long ears flop across his face as he shakes his head. "Dobby will find out, Harry Potter sir!"

The elf vanishes.

"You have a house elf?" Riddle asks.

"Dobby is a free elf employed by the school," Hermione answers defensively.

Riddle raises his eyebrows, and Harry *knows* he's trying to provoke an argument. Hermione can cover a lot of information very quickly when she's on a rant.

Mercifully, Dobby reappears quickly.

"The other elves be packing everything for the Ministry. The trunks is not being in the school, Harry Potter sir."

Harry tilts his head. "Are you forbidden from getting them? What about if you leave the trunk but take the things inside?"

Dobby shakes his head sadly. "Dobby cannot go. These is old wards. They is ordering the elves not to leave."

"Right," Harry sighs. Damn. "Thanks, Dobby."

The elf squeaks, blushes and disappears.

Harry drags his hands down his face and drags his feet back to the

common room. “He’s going to try to help again, isn’t he.”

Hermione winces.

“Again?” Riddle wonders.

Harry waves it away. “We got caught up in the Weasley-Malfoy feud. Cake bomb. Sealed barrier. Rouge bludger. He meant well.”

“I see,” Riddle says in a way that implies he doesn’t. “Then, he was the Malfoy family elf. I do recall Draco complaining about that a few years ago.”

“I’m surprised he mentioned it. Not his dad’s proudest moment, being outsmarted by a twelve-year-old,” Harry grins.

Riddle’s lips twitch. “There was a lot more talk of stealing than outsmarting. But everyone knows house elves can’t be stolen.”

Hermione hums, distracted. She’s got her hands on the books again, there’ll be no discussion of anything else from that corner of the common room.

“Raided the library already, Hermione? Why am I not surprised,” Riddle says. Nosy.

Hermione opens her mouth, then visibly restrains herself from talking about her research. Harry steps forward so Riddle can’t get a clear view of the titles.

“Well. Goodbye, Riddle,” Harry says pointedly.

It’s rudeness bordering on hostility, but Riddle is merely amused. “‘til morning, then.”

“Let’s see those books,” Harry says as soon as the older boy disappears. He eyes the auror, but as long as they don’t cast anything in front of him, they’re not breaking Umbridge’s rules. He keeps his voice down.

Hermione opens the thickest book.

“I’ve only done a brief skim, but I think we’ll manage basic spells. Wandless magic is rare in Europe more because of stigma than difficulty. Of course – if it was a mark of power, everyone would want to do it. Wands make spells more powerful and easier to cast, but

many cultures don't use wands at all. It's closely associated with Africa, which is a gross oversimplification – it's not all African cultures or only African cultures, but from what I gather, the perception got tangled up with European elitism, leading Europeans to disdain wandless magic as poor-man's magic – magic for wizards that can't afford wands."

Harry shakes his head fondly. He recognises one of her make-a-badge causes by now. "Tell you what. We survive this, I'll shout us a world tour. You can learn from them in person and write a better book."

"My own book," Hermione gets a gleam in her eye, but quickly refocuses. "Well, anyway. Wandless spells are channelled a bit differently. To access it requires more concentration, a clearer mental image and a stronger will. It's a bit like how silent casting is different from vocal casting; it's not just saying the words in your head. Wandless magic is a little more difficult again, because you have to make up the difference in focus and power that the wand usually provides. There's no movement to shape the magic, it's just pointing and speaking. We are accustomed to spells feeling a certain way and taking a certain amount of effort, we will tend to underpower them when doing it wandlessly. We'll be learning each spell from scratch again, so take it one at a time."

Harry isn't surprised Riddle learned wandless magic despite the stigma. He clearly isn't a follower – not of leaders or societal conventions. Nor is he surprised that Riddle isn't flaunting it. Wandless magic is an interesting conflict – it increases actual power and decreases the amount of power other people think you have. In a lot of ways, perceived power is more important than actual power, because it attracts people. If you win a person's support, they do your bidding and you can use their power by proxy. Actual power is limited and quickly outstripped by a few followers.

Harry and Hermione divide the books between them and read for a few hours. They find a few tips, but not enough for Hermione's liking. Wandless magic is less structured, more about feelings and will, so it's no surprise that the instructions are less precise than the spell manuals they're used to. In a way, it's less complicated, but it sounds difficult. Not the most difficult thing he's done – not learning to cast a patronus in third year, which is fortunate because they only have two months.

Harry goes to bed when his eyes start to blur. He's not getting much more than repeated information at this point. Enough reading. He's a hands-on learner.

He unstraps his wand holster for the first time and puts it carefully out the way.

The Ministry can keep him from his friend and family, from his belongings, from his wand, but they can't keep him from his magic. They won't keep him down.

He points at his pillow, image firmly in mind, and demands, "Accio!"

His pillow flops over.

Harry grins and raises his hand again.

Chapter End Notes

> This chapter was mostly set-up for the next eight weeks of training. Week 1 will be lots of fun, maybe 3-4 chapters depending on how many words it takes me to patch the holes up.
>
> What do you guys think about having Rita Skeeter do periodic interviews? I had them planned originally because it happens in the Triwizard tournament. It'd also make it feel more like a reality show, as the confessional type of thing they all do. If figure these games are more similar to our reality shows, since its drawn out for months of day-in-the-life stuff and the actual hunger games stuff is like a spicy finale episode.
>
> But the champions don't get the newspaper so the payoff might be limited and this fic is long as balls already. Thoughts?

Day one

Chapter Summary

> I bumped the rating up to M for a scene I just finished writing for when our champions finally get to the arena. Colour me surprised that the rating change is due to sexiness instead of violence.
> I'm going to be flat out with work for the next few months. I've got the next six-ish chapters finished and I'll do the last few edits about once a week, but then there's a hole I need to patch and a lot more editing to do – I'm not sure if I'll finish before I run out of my buffer so we might have a wait on our hands after the month is up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cedric waves them over. Harry doesn't see at first, squinting in the bright light, so he's mildly surprised when Hermione pushes him into a bench across from the Hufflepuffs.

"Cedric, Amelia. Morning," Harry greets, a little strained. His potion hasn't kicked in yet.

"Are you alright?" Cedric asks.

"Headache. Snape," Harry says. Something he now gets to look forward to twice a day. He doesn't know how he's expected to do any other training if occlumency fries his brain.

"Ah," Cedric winces sympathetically.

It is a bad sign, Harry reflects, that his mentor seems more out to get him than most of his competitors. Training is not going to go well.

"How are your mentors?" Hermione asks.

"I like Mr Scamander. He's kind and clever and he knows so much about magical creatures," Amelia says. "He was young in his games, too. No one expected him to win, either."

Cedric nods agreeably. "He is brilliant. Flitwick is too, of course. He's a bit hard to keep up with, honestly. He's working so much faster than we do in classes."

Hermione looks like she has to strangle a burst of envy before she begs to join the private tutoring. “Professor McGonagall is much the same, though we haven’t done much with her yet. We’ve mostly worked with Professor Snape so far and he’s, well…”

“Terrible? Unhelpful? Sadistic?”

“Harry!” Hermione hisses. “He’s a professor!”

“You’re training together?” Cedric asks, unsurprised.

“Of course, are you not?” Hermione says, and Harry sends Cedric a grateful look for the distraction.

Amelia shakes her head and stares at her plate. “I’m so far behind. I can’t keep up with the things Professor Flitwick teaches Cedric.”

“Hey now,” Cedric tugs her into his side. “You’re clever, and that’s worth far more than memorising some over-complicated spells.”

Harry has a much grimmer assessment. Amelia is good, for her age. He put her with the fifth years in the DA. But the champions are mostly sixth and seventh years, and the best in their schools. Amelia only has the most basic foundations of magic, the same everyone else mastered years ago.

“We’ll see each other around. And you can come to me if anyone gives you a hard time. Hufflepuffs stick together,” Cedric says.

“That goes for us too. We’ve got your back,” Harry says firmly. Hermione nods.

“And we’ve got yours,” Cedric agrees and looks over their shoulders. “Roger! Over here.”

“Morning, Cedric, Potter, Granger, Bones,” Roger Davies says. He sits beside Cedric without looking at Trelawny, who is following behind him like an awkward duckling. Harry doesn’t know if he’s ignoring her or if he has forgotten she is there. “Keen for training? Kingsley just gave me the list of stations. I’m going to check out the combat rooms, and maybe hit the gym after dinner. Target range first, I reckon, then duelling and combat class. Not sure what the difference is, though.”

Cedric hums thoughtfully. “I don’t know details. My father warned me not to mess with the combat class trainer, but said the class is the most important.”

Harry nods. “That makes sense. Duelling is strictly one-on-one, face-to-face. It’s very… artificial? Simplified. Duelling doesn’t consider groups, ambushes, traps, creatures or anything.”

“There are other important skills to learn, not just fighting,” Hermione says. “Healing, for one; for all the injuries you are bound to get applying those combat lessons. And then there’s warding, curse breaking, transfiguration, magical creatures, potions, herbology, runes and enchanting, wilderness survival–”

“Healing, I’ll grant you, but combat is the most crucial. If you can’t survive the first five minutes, the rest isn’t going to matter,” Davies says.

Hermione straightens, gearing up for a debate. Harry tries to pay attention, but Trelawny is distracting him. She hasn’t stopped staring, and her attention has passed rude and landed smack in the middle of weird.

“You will face your foe in the ring and suffer for it,” Trelawny affects a deep, serious voice. It falls rather short of the profound revelation she intends it to be.

There is a moment of silence as everyone exchanges looks.

“It’s how she says good morning,” Davies rolls his eyes.

“Right,” Harry says, for lack of anything else. “I wasn’t planning on doing combat training today, but, er, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Trelawny nods gravely.

Harry is content to drop the subject – Hermione is not. “What makes you say that? I didn’t see you divine it from anything.”

“When you are as experienced in divination as I, you develop an intuitive sense for these things.”

If Hermione gets momentum, she’ll be impossible to stop. Harry throws up a diversion. “What lesson do you want to do first?”

“I thought we could spend the morning asking the trainers about their lesson plans and organising the most critical into a training schedule,” Hermione says.

Of course, she does.

At that moment, Umbridge says the training rooms are open and a swam of omnioculars descend to capture their reactions.

Harry shifts in his seat. “Are they really going to record everything we do?”

It’s just occurred to him to feel self-conscious about his breakfast. Mrs Weasley wouldn’t approve.

Davies is already up and heading for the doors, plate abandoned. The others aren’t far behind.

“It makes sense that they’re interested,” Davies shrugs. “We’re celebrities, now.”

“Just ignore them, Harry,” Cedric says, soothingly. “It’s no different from the gossips hanging about the halls.”

“There are gossips and then there are stalkers. One of those won’t try to follow me into the loo,” Harry says.

Cedric was one of the most popular boys in school. He is used to the attention. Harry could use a little bit of that equanimity about now.

“I don’t think I want to be a celebrity,” Harry says.

…

There are no schedules to direct them, so by unspoken consensus, the group sticks together. They don’t know what to expect, or where Bellatrix is, and no one is keen to face it alone.

The old Defence classroom is the first they come across. It’s full of cages. There is a grindylow, an ashwinder, a fire crab and more. Nothing too dangerous, but there’s an ominous station for information about XXXX and XXXXX beasts. Harry ogles it. “They wouldn’t pit us against five-X creatures, would they?”

“The past tournaments did,” Hermione grimaces. “Routinely.”

“And it’s not like acromantulas are difficult to find, around here,” Harry groans.

“There are *wild acromantulas* nearby?” Amelia squeaks.

“A colony in the forest. Hagrid names them and gives them treats on their birthdays,” Harry says.

“Most of these species are not native to the Isles,” Hermione says, scanning the list.

“The Ministry could import the ones we’re missing,” Davies says.

“They would have to alter habitats to suit them. I’d avoid any hot and dry biomes unless you want to meet the beast that is worth the expense,” Hermione says.

Cedric suggests they move on when Amelia starts turning pale. Avoiding it isn’t going to do her any favours in the long run, Harry thinks.

Omnioculars dutifully follow them as they continue to explore. They make Harry’s shoulders itch. He tries to follow Cedric’s advice, ignoring them, but every flash of gold in the corner of his eye reminds him. He can’t shake the unease.

In the Transfiguration room, Cedric wants a refresher on turning desks into wolves while Amelia works on transfiguring sticks to trip-lines with another trainer. They’re absorbed in their work, but the Ravenclaws and Hermione are impatient to see everything on offer, so they move on.

A potions station is set up on the first floor, oddly, rather than the labs in the Dungeons. It’s much more pleasant. Bright, airy, and there’s a station for identifying magical and non-magical plants as ingredients or poison or food. Harry is curious, actually. He can’t immediately imagine how potions could be used in the arena, and they extract themselves from Slughorn with promises to return soon.

Some rooms are expected. The Charms classroom is set up for duelling and the room next door is for combat class. The instructor shouts “Constant Vigilance!” and throws a chair at them.

The third-floor corridor is set up to test spell accuracy over a long distance. Moving targets swoop around and dart behind armour, hiding from Roger when he steps up for a go. Harry watches critically. He hasn’t seen Roger Davies cast before. Cedric and Hermione are both faster and more accurate, but Davies has Kingsley Shacklebolt as a mentor; he’ll improve quickly. Hermione is eying the targets with interest, but Harry doesn’t think he’ll bother training here. His speed gives him an advantage in close-range fighting. Sniping will just expose his position before he can get close. Long range won’t be his first choice in the arena.

There is a room for Warding and another for Curse Breaking. Harry is looking forward to learning some protective wards. He can't imagine he'll last long in the arena if he can't sleep. The need becomes more pressing when he sees a Durmstrang girl, Stoeva, find and slice her way through a ward set under the guidance of a Curse Breaker, to reach a doll at the centre and set it on fire. She catches them watching and her smile says *you won't be able to hide from me*.

There's a room transformed into a forest, wherein one of the Beauxbatons girls is battling a forest fire. Make that several nature rooms, actually, with all sorts of different habitats and survival skills. One advertises lessons for Wilderness Induced Living Difficulties – basic food, water and shelter acquisition.

Besides a room for Runes and Enchanting, there is another for Healing magic, and a gym full of exercise equipment and melee weapons and an agility course. Hermione gets about three steps into the gym before writing it off, but Harry thinks, actually, that might be a good idea. It's something to keep him fit without Quidditch practice and it looks kind of fun.

"There's a lot to cover," Hermione says, upon completing the tour. "If we invest time now in making a study plan, we'll be more efficient and learn a lot more–"

Harry rolls his eyes and tugs Hermione into the Healing room. Roger waves goodbye and heads back to the combat class. It sounds a lot more exciting than bone mending, but Snape told them to steer clear for now.

"Here to learn?" a wizard claps his hands, looking between them with a smile. There are three more trainers behind him, and no other champions for them to focus on.

Hermione is not easily intimidated. "Yes. We both know basic first aid, but we want to learn more serious healing."

"Welcome. I am Healer Hopkirk," he says. "Miss Granger, you'll be with Madam Abbott and Mediwizard Figg. Mr Potter, with me and Mediwitch Midgen. Let's get started."

Harry knows how to fix cuts and bruises, treat pain and minor spell damage. He ran a Defence club – it comes with the territory. He knows his limit, and when he should send the kid to Madam Pomfrey. He's got a lot to learn.

“Common injuries first, then?” Hopkirk suggests.

“Makes sense.”

“We’ll start with poisoning and then concussions, that should do for this afternoon.”

“Poisoning is common?” Harry says. Seems a bit convoluted for the likes of Bellatrix.

“You’d be surprised how many champions eat unknown mushrooms when the hunger kicks in,” Hopkirk says. “Anyway, the most important thing to know about poison is it is a *dose*, not a substance. Everything is poisonous if you have enough. Six litres of water. Thirteen shots of alcohol. A fraction of a teaspoon of arsenic. What do you think is the first thing you should do if you ingest a poison?”

“Er, stop eating?” Harry says a bit glibly.

“A good start – you don’t want to absorb any more toxin. To that end, the first spell you should cast is the vomiting hex. If you’re poisoned by inhalation or injection, well, we’ll get to that later,” Hopkirk says. The slightly patronising answer is worse than a scolding. Harry straightens up. “In any case, you need to determine the nature of the toxin. Is it directly poisonous or does the problem arise from the compounds you metabolise it into? In the first case, you may solve it by invigorating the liver to filter the toxins out before they can do much damage, in the second case, invigorating the liver will make the problem much worse. Does it bind to your nerves? Your cells? Your blood? You’ll need to know, to treat it appropriately. So the first step is diagnostic spells. Strap in; there’s a lot of them.”

…

Harry doesn’t know how much time has passed, but his head is swimming with Greek words.

“Anacito diletirio,” Harry says.

“Anazito dilitirio,” Midgen corrects his pronunciation.

“Anazito dilitirio,” Harry casts, and his wand gives off a yellow light.

Midgen nods. “Now, for the diagnosis?”

“Vreite,” Harry casts.

“Correct.”

“Ah, another student,” Hopkirk says.

Harry turns, and freezes. It’s the pretty one.

Delacour scans the room and scrunches her nose, “Si primitif.”

Hopkirk clears his throat. “Midgen, would you–”

“Miss Delacour, bienvenue, allow me to help you,” Figg steps forward. Hermione looks annoyed to lose one of her teachers.

Harry braces for the mania, that wild freeing feeling. It doesn’t hit. If the mediwizard is overeager, it’s for the more common reason when encountering a beautiful girl.

“Merci,” Delacour says, cool glare keeping the man at a distance.

Yikes.

Abbott demonstrates a spell for Hermione. They’re already on concussions. She is steaming ahead.

Delacour watches for a moment, and declares, “I have covered poisons and bruising before. I require instruction on healing burns.”

“Certainly,” Figg says.

“So, what was the wand movement for neurotoxins?” Harry asks Hopkirk.

Hopkirk demonstrates, and Harry stares doggedly at his wand. Keeping a wary eye out might be more dangerous, in Delacour’s case. He can’t let her distract him from training.

A lecture on blotched cures that’d turn his insides to goo is just the thing to keep Harry’s attention. Harry hopes he doesn’t get poisoned with anything too fast-acting in the arena, because he’s going to be too terrified to try any counter-spells without crosschecking with Hermione first.

Harry is so focused, he’s startled by a high voice.

“Hem, hem.”

They turn to the door.

From the corner of his eye, Harry sees Delacour, her back one long line of tension, take a deep breath. When she turns, belatedly, her face is blank, but her knuckles are white.

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Umbridge says like she didn’t just call their attention. “I’m just conducting a random check. We at the Ministry are proud to offer the highest quality of training to make true champions.”

There is a pause.

“Where was I? Ah, incorrect wand movements,” Hopkirk turns back to Harry.

“Hem, hem. Miss Delacour, sleeves are not to be rolled past the elbow. You wouldn’t want to be accused of interfering with a champion’s training.”

Harry meets Hermione’s eyes, relieved to see she is as bemused as he is.

Delacour takes a deep breath and unrolls her sleeves. Her shirt looks a size too large. It’s not as form-fitting as his or Hermione’s. The cuffs hang over Fleur’s fingers. She shoves them back to her wrists, but they won’t stay there when she’s waving her arms around.

“Ze are too long.”

“They are built for human proportions, dear,” Umbridge smiles.

Another, more incredulous pause.

“As I was saying,” Hopkirk says, “The degree of the twist is essential. The second syllable must coincide with the top of the wand arc. You don’t want to mix up the incantation for neurotoxins with the wand movements for cytotoxins; you’ll remove the whole neuron instead of just clearing the binding sites.”

“Okay, but let’s say I did do that– how would I fix it?”

“Hmm, a mistake like that and you’re essentially dealing with spell damage, much like a curse. Very tricky to fix. Ideally, you’d receive a potion to regrow the cells, but in the arena, well. Your sponsors might provide it.”

“If they decide I’m worth saving. I’d rather not take my chances.”

A pink blob with a clipboard stops beside Harry, poised with an

elaborate quill. Hopkirk ignores her and carries on. “You may not have a choice. Healing is very finicky. It requires magic to be applied very specifically to scattered targets over a broad area. It takes about the same time and effort to heal someone with spells as it does with potions, but spells can’t be prepared ahead of time – they’re applied as a person is dying, you simply may not have enough time, and in any case, the pressure makes it more challenging. If you vanish your neurons, you will have *very* little time.”

“…inefficient use of magic… potential for applying healing lessons for unintended purposes…” Umbridge mutters as she writes.

Harry stares at her. He turns back to Hopkirk. “What if I was under stasis, wouldn’t that give me more time?”

“To a point. Stasis spells do not last in perpetuity. Moreover, the effects cannot be isolated to, say, a single limb– they induce a coma. If injured, you would not be able to apply a stasis charm and then continue to heal yourself.”

“My allies could heal me.”

“…*delusions* of cooperation…”

“I would not recommend it. Stasis charms make you entirely vulnerable. You would be relying on other champions to act against their own best interests.”

Harry raises an eyebrow. If Hermione was dying, he’d do anything in his power to heal her. He needs to know how. “Still, better a slim chance than none at all.”

“…does not follow advice…” Is she trying to intimidate him?

“Those spells are not the best use of your time. They are difficult to learn and you’re not likely to ever use them,” *because you’ll be dead before you can try*, Hopkirk doesn’t say.

Harry crosses his arms and sets his shoulders.

Hopkirk sighs. “How about a deal? Learn to heal debilitating injuries first – broken bones, concussions, burns – common injuries that would seriously affect your prospects in the arena. Afterwards, we’ll cover the near-fatal maladies.”

Harry considers it. He’ll be training for ten hours a day, on top of

after-dinner study sessions and whatever Snape puts him through. He can set aside a couple of those hours for healing. It's one of the more important skills, and unlike defence, Harry is starting from scratch.

"I'll be here most days, probably." Whenever Umbridge *isn't*.

"…poor time management…"

"Excellent," Hopkirk says, once again ignoring Umbridge with alacrity. "We'll cover concussions next time. Best not to start a new topic this late. It's almost dinner time."

Chapter End Notes

> This chapter is a short one because I ran out of editing time. I also probably missed some mistakes in my rush, ah well. I'll try to finished the next bit and publish in a few days so you can have two updates this week.

Day two

Chapter Summary

> Harry does not get along with his mentor. Umbridge starts making life miserable. Harry pisses off a few more people because he just can't help himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

– "Expelliarmus!" Harry's wand flies from his hand, "That's excellent, Neville!" – "Twenty laps of the pitch, then fifty push-ups. Last one back gets to clean the locker room." "Oliver, it's three gusts short of a hurricane out there!" – Bellatrix Black, eyes crazed, "Your godfather might be beyond our reach, but you certainly aren't."– Lily, reading Harry a story. His eyes are dropping, he's determined to stay awake until the end, but he can no longer hear the words –

"Ow," Harry rubs the tension in his forehead. It doesn't help. It's pulsing behind his eyes.

"You have no discipline. How do you ever expect to succeed?" Snape says.

"I have no idea," Harry snaps. "Why don't you tell me what 'clear your mind' actually *means* and we'll go from there?"

"It's not difficult, Potter."

"Maybe it wouldn't be if I *knew what I was supposed to do*."

Snape plants his hands on the desk and looms. "You have to figure it out. This isn't one of your classes, with teachers to drag you to the right conclusions and ply you with study guides for you to mindlessly memorise. You can't rely on people to do your thinking for you forever, Potter."

"All minds are different. What works for one will not for another," Hermione cuts in, a little wide around the eyes.

Snape turns slowly. "Did I ask for your opinion?"

Hermione raises her chin. "I was clarifying with Harry."

Harry hears what she didn't say and he unclenches his jaw. She is imploring him to back off. She is telling him Snape isn't holding back information on purpose. That's… fine. Harry can put up with Snape being a terrible teacher, in small doses. But they've only been at this for twenty minutes and there's another ten before breakfast starts. Shit. "I need to think it over. Let's do something else. How about duelling."

"So now you want my instruction?" Snape says.

Harry closes his eyes. Even Michael Corner isn't this difficult to work with.

"You told us not to go to the spell range or duelling or fighting rooms. I assumed because you plan to teach us instead."

"You expect an awful lot of my time."

The whole of the DA *combined* isn't this exhausting.

"Fine, then. We'll go to the duelling instructors," Harry says.

"Do not."

"Why not?"

Hermione sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. Harry feels a flash of guilt.

"Is your memory so poor that it cannot retain simple instructions for more than twenty-four hours? Do not give away your strengths. Do not duel other champions. Do not get caught alone with their mentors."

"So we'll only duel the trainers. I'm still not seeing a problem."

"You'd have to resist the urge to show off."

Snape doesn't think he can. Snape is wrong and too bitter to ever admit it; it's not even worth arguing that point. Harry will find a weaker link. "What if the training rooms are empty?"

"They're never empty."

"Are you talking about trainers and omnioculars? Are we supposed to be hiding from them, too?" Is Harry supposed to hide all the way to the arena and then lay down and die, lest someone think he's

competent?

“Don’t be obtuse, Potter. The rooms are popular – there will be champions.”

“Then we still need to go, because we need to see how well everyone else can fight.” Harry *knows* that’s a good strategy.

“Many will misrepresent their abilities, and I doubt you will perceive the difference.”

Even if Harry didn’t have extensive experience sorting apart the competent from incompetent in the DA, Harry knows what fake fumbling looks like – he dealt with Romilda Vane’s attempts to get hands-on wand lessons all of fifth year.

“If everyone else is trying to be underestimated, shouldn’t we go and downplay our abilities, too?” Harry says.

“I have low enough expectations for your restraint, do not make me speculate on your acting ability.”

“Then when, exactly, are we supposed to learn to fight?”

Snape’s nostrils flair and he draws his wand.

Harry tenses, wondering if he’s gone too far.

“This is the detonation curse. It is a long-distance blasting spell. *Ekragei*.”

And that’s it. *That’s* the sum-total of the lesson.

Harry is going to scream.

…

“He’s such a prick!”

“Hmm,” Hermione doesn’t tell Harry off, which is scathing criticism, coming from her.

“We need to know what we’re up against so we can prepare. Spying is a good strategy.”

“He didn’t say it wasn’t, just that he doesn’t think we can do it,” Hermione bristles at the affront, then grudgingly says, “I suppose, a

false sense of security could be more dangerous than not knowing what to expect."

"Don't give him the benefit of the doubt. He's either being deliberately unhelpful, or he's so convinced that we're impulsive idiots that he's useless. How is he supposed to train us when he can't even figure out who we are?"

"We still have Professor McGonagall. If Professor Snape is too… much, well, we won't waste our time," Hermione says.

"And another thing! Can you see Bellatrix Black downplaying her abilities? *Really*? All she ever does is try to intimidate us."

"It doesn't seem her style, no," Hermione says as they enter the hall.

Harry and Hermione are early for breakfast, but not the earliest. Roger Davies is at the table Harry is starting to think of as theirs, scoffing down food and keeping one eye on the clock.

"In a hurry?" Harry asks.

Roger swallows and grins. "Just keen."

"For anything specific, or just in general?" Hermione asks, helping herself to toast.

"You didn't go back to the combat class, yesterday, did you?" Roger says. "It was *awesome*. I'm hoping to get a few minutes with Moody before everyone else flocks in."

"I'll race you," Cedric says, sliding into a seat. For Harry and Hermione, he says, "Moody was one of the most decorated aurors in his day. He knows what it's like to fight for your life against wizards, creatures, ambushes – you name it."

"He really knows his stuff. With him, it's all about using your surroundings, playing to your strengths," Roger says.

"His class is fantastic. A lot of it is an extension of what we were doing in the DA. You'll love it, Harry," Cedric says.

Harry's hand clenches around his fork.

"Snape recommended otherwise," Hermione says.

Cedric raises his eyebrows.

“What did McGonagall say?” Roger asks.

Harry shrugs. “She was in a meeting.”

“She didn’t say no. There’s your loophole.”

“Because that’ll fly with Snape.”

Cedric grimaces in sympathy.

After a lull filled with determined chewing, Harry voices his concern. “Where’s Amelia?”

“With Mr Scamander. They’re working on her training strategy,” Cedric says.

Harry nods. At least she’s not panicking in a broom closet somewhere.

“Well, I’m off,” Roger says.

Harry's chest burns. He wishes he’d gotten Kingsley instead of Snape. It’s his life on the line, why shouldn’t he train the best he can?

“Mind if we come with you?” Harry bursts out.

“But Harry–” Hermione objects.

Harry raises his eyebrows. He can see his own jealousy and longing reflected in her. He doesn’t know if it’s stronger than her anxiety.

“Oh, all right,” she says and Harry grins.

“You’d better not hog Moody’s attention,” Roger grumbles good-naturedly.

“You’d better get going before we finish breakfast, then,” Cedric retorts.

Roger grins and grabs another piece of toast for the road. He is pulled up short.

Umbridge turns away from supervising something the caretaker is doing beside the doors. She steps to block the isle with a broad smile.

“Food is to be consumed at the tables, Mr Davies.”

Roger takes a bite.

“Seated, Mr Davies.”

He sits and Umbridge stands over him until he finishes.

Cedric cringes. “Merlin, she’s unpleasant.”

Harry nods and watches Roger finally make his escape. Umbridge returns to the caretaker.

Hermione cranes her neck. “What do you think they’re doing?”

“I’m not going over there,” Harry says. Umbridge might speak to him. The idea makes his skin crawl. He doesn’t like her. It’s different from the way he dislikes Snape or Malfoy; no, she reminds him of *Bellatrix* for some godforsaken reason he can’t put his finger on. Bellatrix prowls. Umbridge plods. Harry is pretty sure he could take her even with his wand locked in his holster, but there’s something that screams not to turn his back. Maybe it’s her smile– too wide, stale when it should be sincere, smug when it should be sympathetic.

By the time they’re ready to leave, though, Umbridge is back to lording over the hall from the high table.

Cedric heads over to the new, framed notice. He shrugs. “It’s nothing interesting.”

“‘Training Decree 1: Champions must adhere to the dress code at all times’,” Hermione reads.

The hair on Harry’s neck rises.

“Surely not,” Hermione says, glancing at a group of Beauxbatons students.

“What?” Cedric is baffled by how intently they’re staring at the notice.

“Umbridge had a go at Delacour yesterday about the dress code,” Harry says. “All she did was roll her sleaves up.”

“So Umbridge is a stickler,” Cedric says. “That’s important to keep in mind.”

“And a bully,” Harry mutters. The unease stays with him.

…

Harry, Hermione and Cedric enter the combat room slowly. The last time they stuck their heads in there, a chair went flying at them. Hopefully the culprit is occupied with Roger.

“Cautious, are you? Good,” the head trainer smirks, though it's hard to tell with the way his scars stretch his skin. “Diggory, your shielding needs work– start with Miles.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Potter, Granger – we’ll soon figure out what to do with you,” the man –the lauded Mad-Eye Moody, Harry assumes– stalks around them, prosthetic eye whirring away. He frowns at what he sees.

“You’re allies, then? Friends?”

From his tone, Harry gets the impression that ‘yes’ is the wrong answer.

“Yes,” Harry says, raising his chin.

“You don’t have friends in the arena,” Moody says. “That’s lesson one. If you want to survive, don’t trust anyone.”

“But alliances are an integral part of the strategy–” Hermione says.

“Alliances are a matter of circumstance. They’re a balance of risk and reward – strength in numbers versus an attack from within. Alliances are safest at the start of the game when numbers are high, but as champions start dropping the balance tips. Alliances are unstable. Everyone has the incentive to strike first – you’ve gotta kill them before they kill you. Unless you’re a legilimens, you won’t know when they’re planning to turn on you, and even that might not be enough if they decide to off you while you’re napping. Check your food and water for poison. Ward your sleeping area. Constant vigilance!”

Maybe that applies to everyone else, but Moody doesn’t know how close Harry and Hermione are. Harry *can’t* betray Hermione; her death would hurt more than his own.

They share a look. They’d rather be a pair of blood traitors than a sole victor, no matter what the Ministry’s incentives have to say about it.

Moody snorts. “You’ll learn.”

Moody takes a few more steps and whips out his wand.

Harry has stepped out of the line of fire before Moody has finished moving. Hermione's hand hovers over her holster, wincing when she remembers it's still locked.

"Decent reflexes," Moody tells them. "You've done some fighting."

"Yeah," Harry says.

"Sampson, Ingrid, join me. We've got a new pair to evaluate," Moody grins. Cedric's wince tell Harry all he needs to know. "Who wants to go first?"

"I will," Harry says. Hermione works better when she's seen what she's up against.

"Granger, then. Step up."

Evaluation is a quick and brutal affair. Sampson starts, and when Hermione holds her own against him, Ingrid, and finally Moody step in. Hermione does her best to prevent them surrounding her with judicious application of fireballs, but they eventually disarm her.

Moody nods. "Decent, Granger. Potter, it's your turn."

Harry considers how much to hold back. He'll get more out of training if Moody has an accurate idea of his abilities, but Snape's words are still ringing in his ears – his certainty that Harry wouldn't be able to hold back in front of other champions. Harry wants to prove him wrong.

There's no point hiding from Cedric; he saw it all in the DA, and if Cedric Diggory is untrustworthy, Harry will lose all hope for humanity. He is less certain about Roger. He is slotting into their fledgling alliance, but Harry still barely knows him. He can impress Moody later, when they're alone.

Harry sticks to humanly possible speeds. He still manages to stun Sampson, although Moody immediately revives him, and Harry ends up facing all three again.

Roger is watching with his mouth open. "Damn, Potter, no wonder you led the DA."

The glint in Moody's eyes suggests he's cottoned on, but he doesn't call Harry out for holding back.

“Good, Potter. I hope you’re now aware that stunning spells are not much good when you’re outnumbered.”

Harry nods. He doesn’t like the idea of casting something more… permanent. He’ll have to get used to it, because the alternative is fighting Bellatrix again and again until she kills them all.

“Ah, just in time,” Moody says, greeting the newcomers with a jinx. All four Durmstrang students dodge it easily.

Irina Ganz is one of them. Harry straightens. Excellent. He wants to see what it takes to be a duelling champion.

“Hello Hermy-own,” Viktor Krum smiles and makes his way over.

“It’s Hermione,” she corrects kindly. “You can call me Granger if that’s easier.”

“Her-my-no-ni,” he attempts again, and laughs a little at himself. “I will practice.”

Krum is a bit bowlegged on the ground, but Harry doesn’t doubt he’s plenty agile and dangerous. A girl, Ivankova, trails after him like his shadow offers protection. She is a bit younger than the others. They’re housemates, if Harry remembers correctly. They’re also both purebloods, but neither are looking at Hermione like she’s dirt. They’ve managed not to trip over the lowest bar Harry sets for people. Harry will reserve judgement.

“I am Viktor,” Krum says, offering a hand to Harry. “And this is Sasha.”

“Harry Potter. Nice to meet you,” Harry shakes their hands.

“Busy morning,” Moody comments, drawing their attention. “Gather ‘round. We’ve got a lesson on shielding deadly curses.”

Moody starts pacing. “Everyone here knows Protego, thank Merlin for small mercies. The strength of the spell depends on the caster, but even at its best, Protego will fail against strong curses. For curses, most people turn to stronger variants. In order: Protego duo, maxima, totalum or horribilis. The stronger variants are designed to be area protection charms rather than personal shields. Too unwieldy for duels, but they are excellent if you are surrounded or outnumbered. Protego horribilis can stand up against everything short of the killing curse. So, who can tell me how to block that?”

“The killing curse? It’s unstoppable,” Roger says.

“Wrong! There is one shield that can defend against the killing curse. Anyone?”

“A physical shield,” Hermione says after a moment to think.

Moody nods. “Solid objects, but only in very specific circumstances, and I suggest you do not test these limits. If it’s a conjured object, you’re dead. If you’re touching it, you’re dead. Yes, it can kill you if it hits the ground too close to your feet.”

Harry didn’t know that.

“A living barrier works best– a tree, a person. Unliving objects invariably explode. That includes your handy tree the second time it’s hit.”

Good to know. Harry is itching to try out some ideas.

“Now, you need to get an object between you and an incoming spell, so I hope you’ve got excellent control of summoning and levitation spells,” Moody grins crookedly. “Partner up. There are books around here somewhere. Try not to clobber yourselves with them.”

Hermione’s hand shoots up. “What would you suggest we do if there are no objects nearby?”

“Dodge and run away,” Moody says dryly.

Harry tries shielding first. He doesn’t appreciate how tiny the area blocked by the blocks is until it’s hovering in front of him.

“Too close, Potter,” Moody says. “If that blew up, you’d be picking splinters out of your eyeballs.”

Harry moves the book further away. It looks even smaller, now.

He manages to intercept Hermione’s disarming charm three times out of five. That’s not good enough. It’s going to take some practice.

When it’s Hermione’s turn to shield, Harry reserves part of his attention for catching her wand when it comes his way, but most is focused on the other pairs.

Cedric is picking up the technique quite quickly. Krum and Ivankova are both fast, accurate casters. Ganz and her housemate, Penchev, are

having fun. They seem to be close friends. Ganz is working on an interesting technique – she's got three books orbiting her. It's a good idea. Spells move faster than summoned objects, so she's got backups ready when one is blown up. Harry will have to try it later because Hermione has a schedule she's determined to keep.

They head to lunch. Krum and Ivankova decide to walk with them. Harry eyes them suspiciously. Hermione and Krum jump straight into the deep end of a conversation about arithmancy. It must be a continuation of their chat at the Ball. Harry and Ivankova trail behind them. She seems shy and Harry is too busy listening to the others to exert much effort putting her at ease. He doesn't say much except to point out the trick steps. Hermione is animated and happy. Harry wishes they'd met in different circumstances, so Harry could trust that this isn't a ploy, because he wants nothing more than for Hermione to be happy.

Krum and Ivankova aren't ashamed to sit with them, even when the Blood Supremacists start sneering, for whatever that's worth. But everyone here has good reason to be working an angle. How can Harry be sure anyone is genuine until the spells start flying?

The arithmancy conversation lasts all through lunch. Harry can't contribute much to the topic and he's too anxious to leave, even though he knows Hermione is smart enough to spot a trap and strong enough to get out of it without help. He feels like he's hovering like a jealous and overprotective prick. He's relieved when the Durmstrang students return to combat class after eating.

"You're brooding, Harry," Hermione says.

"I don't know if we can trust him," Harry says.

Hermione smiles sadly. "I don't know either."

They head to transfiguration. It's surprisingly crowded. A couple Durmstrang boys are working on conjuration. The rest are gathered around a mandrake plant, listening to a trainer talk about – ah. Animagi.

Attempting to become an animagus is a pretty desperate move, at this point, but considering which champions are interested, it makes sense. Amelia, Trelawney, Görder, Gauthier, Hennequin and Boutin. Young, scared and unprepared. Since they're attempting it now and not earlier, they must not have expected to be chosen by the goblet. Harry would bet none of them are strong duellers. But people have survived

the Games by hiding all the way to the end. It's not a well-regarded strategy but it might be their only chance.

"Hello, Amelia," Harry says. She's been staring at her mandrake leaf for a long time. "Are you going to do the ritual?"

"Newt thinks it's worth the risk."

"The risk?" Harry doesn't recall it being particularly dangerous. Although, he and his friends did it in secret over the summer and they didn't have full access to information. Maybe they were just lucky nothing went wrong.

"It takes at least a month. It will interrupt the rest of my training, and there's no guarantee that a lightning storm will happen before the tasks start, or that I'll get a useful animal form."

"It's not as disruptive as you'd think. It'll help with your silent casting."

"Are you an animagus?"

Harry winks. "We covered the theory in classes. Don't think you can cheat. Take that leaf out for even a second and it won't work."

Amelia squares her shoulders and puts it in her mouth. "Ugh."

Harry winces in sympathy. He still remembers the taste.

"Gross," she mutters, lisping a bit.

The Durmstrang boys sneer. "Imagine getting into the Games without being an animagus. I'd give up and die, wouldn't you?"

"It would be quicker," the other replies.

Harry looks over sharpy. It's the boys Delacour embarrassed at the Ball, Bronner and Romanov, the rhinoceros animagus. Harry can see the resemblance.

"I bet some of them can't handle it," Romanov says.

Harry curls his lip. Bullies. Bigger, smarter versions of Crabbe and Goyle.

"The Veela is an animal already. Maybe they can teach her the reverse, how to turn into a real witch?" Bronner says.

Romanov snickers. Clearly, they're holding a grudge. Delacour better watch her back.

Amelia looks scared. Harry squeezes her shoulder. "Don't worry about him. You'll hear him coming a mile away, in either form."

"You say something, Potter?" Romanov demands.

There are so many ways Harry wants to respond to that, but all of them would risk dragging Amelia into the middle of a fight.

Instead, Harry gives such an overexaggerated 'who me?' look that it gets a grin out of the little Hufflepuff.

He ignores the question and walks away, because that's guaranteed to get their attention away from Amelia.

"Yeah, run away!"

How predictable.

Harry doesn't turn his back on them – he's not actually trying to provoke a fight. He's too busy for that. He has to speed-run the sixth year NEWT curriculum to catch up to the seventh years, and even if he could somehow manage all that in an afternoon, he still won't be ready for McGonagall this evening.

…

Professor McGonagall is *awesome*. When she duels against Snape, the whole room turns against him. Animals, elements, smoke, spears – threats come from all directions. There isn't a shield that will work against a tsunami, so Snape counter-transfigures what he can, sending vines and daggers and poisonous vapours back at McGonagall, and vanishes what he cannot transfigure.

"That will do," McGonagall says before a horse can kick Snape's head in. A few waves of her wand send the trashed room to rights. McGonagall brushes a lock of hair back into her strict bun and turns to the students. Harry's posture straightens immediately. "So you see, transfiguration has several useful applications in a duel."

Harry and Hermione nod mutely.

"You both have an aptitude for the subject. Continue to attend the transfiguration class for review and practice. It is important to have a

strong foundations and repertoire of basic, versatile spells you can cast *reliably*," McGonagall frowns at them. They nod again. Appeased, the professor continues. "In our private lessons, we will push your limits. For the first fortnight, we will focus on the practical aspects of the NEWT curriculum you have not covered yet, mainly conjuration and human transfiguration. In the following weeks, I will teach you to transfigure someone else's transfigured objects and animals. This is more difficult than directly transfiguring an object or animal, and it becomes exponentially more difficult with every iteration away from the original. Would that I could assign you essays on the subject. Suffice to say, the magic gets muddled. For the same reason, transfiguring someone else's conjuration – an object whose existence is pure magic – is another step up in difficulty. I expect you will be able to transfigure conjurations before our months of training are through. If you make enough progress, I will also teach you illusionary magic."

Hermione is practically buzzing beside him.

"But for now – conjuration. This is your best weapon, as many of your opponents will not be able to turn it against you. There are ways to make conjurations exceedingly difficult to vanish. We will start with the elements, in particular, fire and water, to build off your experience with incendio and aguamenti. Neither spell, in its most basic form, is powerful or immutable. We will address that now."

Two hours later, Harry falls into bed and stares wide-eyed at the canopy. He smells faintly of smoke and charred hair. His eyebrows tingle from being regrown twice.

"Merlin's *balls*."

Chapter End Notes

> Okay, Snape fans, drop the pitchforks. I have the Snape & Harry thing penciled in as a slow-burn enemies-to-tolerance. Calm your farm.

Day three

Chapter Summary

> Harry is a little shit and Hermione is a terrible enabler. Snape is definitely a bastard but the jury is out on Fleur.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Games have patterns and one is near ubiquitous: the pureblood extremists form a pack and hunt down other champions until the alliance turns on itself. This year is no exception.

At lunch on the third day, it's clear the Blood Supremacist alliance has coagulated. Bellatrix is in the centre, surrounded by the ones she favours most. On her right is the scary Durmstrang girl, Stoeva, and next is Mazet, a Beauxbatons girl Harry hadn't thought much of which was probably a mistake. He'll be paying more attention going forward. Three of the boys have their own huddle going on; Romanov and Bronner are conversing about something that requires a lot of hand waving while a younger Beauxbatons boy, Gauthier, looks on with a puppyish kind of worship.

Harry is surprised to see Riddle among them, directly on Bellatrix's left. The Supremacists follow an ideology that anyone can subscribe to, technically. Harry can imagine Riddle getting behind one tenet – death before dishonour – if the death in question is everyone else's. But a pretty core Supremacist belief is about pure blood being better than the rest, and that's not a message that tends to attract many muggleborns. It seems a particularly bad fit for Riddle, what with his ego. Harry doesn't believe for a second that Riddle thinks purebloods are innately better than him.

Riddle doesn't look concerned by how leery the others are or the smugness radiating off Bellatrix. Harry supposes she's received a promotion – Riddle was certainly more powerful than her in Slytherin. Not only is Bellatrix more popular than him now, but Riddle's social standing depends entirely on her because she's the only one that wants him there. That seems… unstable.

"There is a terrible shadow over your future," Trelawny sits in front of him, blocking his view. Harry sighs. Another day, another doom. "It

has the power of a hurricane and it breathes death."

"Yes, and its teeth are swords and its claws are spears and its tail hits like a thunderbolt. Don't plagiarise," Hermione says.

"If you say so, Trelawney." Harry has no idea what they're talking about. "What's next in our schedule?"

Trelawny opens her mouth. Harry wasn't asking her.

"Duelling and then potions," Hermione says.

"Will we see any of you there?" Harry says. Anything to move the conversation along.

Cedric nods. "I should go to potions. Wasn't my best class. I used to borrow my friend Jeremy's notes, he –" Cedric scrunches his nose.

"What?" Harry asks.

"Remembered I can't write him. I went to the owlery last night. It's empty. All the birds are gone."

"Floos are closed, too," Hermione says quietly.

Harry considers his pumpkin juice. The slow swirls of suspended pulp are not much comfort. "Just us, then."

…

Several long platforms run the length of the duelling room. Ganz heads straight to one and starts warming up.

Harry waves off a trainer. He's not here to duel. He pulled Hermione away from their strict schedule when he saw Ganz enter the room and he's not about to waste the opportunity.

"Why is Ganz here?" Hermione wonders. "Her mentor has been her duelling instructor for years. She doesn't need to learn from these trainers."

"Then I suppose she's trying to intimidate everyone."

It's working. Harry can tell immediately that Ganz is a league above anyone in the DA. It's a bit like watching professional Quidditch for the first time. The level of refined movement from hours upon hours of practice; the ease at which she pulls off moves that Harry has

stumbled over; the advanced techniques Harry can only hope he will learn in time for the arena.

Hermione makes a frustrated huff. “What is she… how?”

“A reverse feint combined with Hurst’s Defence, you see? There, she just did it again,” Harry says quietly. He narrows his eyes. That move puts her in a versatile position where she can attack or defend in any direction on short notice. Harry can’t see an obvious weakness, so he’d have to make one. “Maybe disrupt her footing?”

“Area effect spell?”

“Nothing that would obstruct line of sight – she’d take advantage. Maybe a curse to the floor – if the spell isn’t aimed right at her she might not bother blocking it.” Harry doesn’t have high hopes, though. She’ll know the different between a misaimed spell and one deliberately aimed at the ground. Of course, if there’s a curse going for her head at the same time, she’ll prioritise that one. “A pincer move would raise our chances.”

It might be their only chance, Harry thinks, resting his elbows on the barrier.

Ganz disarms her trainer. Harry turns his attention to the next platform while they reset. There’s nothing new over there. Harry got the measure of Romanov within moments. Romanov fights like he’s got a hammer rather than a wand. He has a small spell repertoire, but the few he does use are nasty curses practiced until perfect and quick and powerful.

Dangerous but predictable.

Harry is better. Which is not to say that Harry wants to run into him in the arena, backed up by half a dozen other Supremacists, one of which is *Bellatrix*.

Ganz and her trainer start again. Harry turns back to the more interesting duel.

“If you’re fast enough…” Hermione muses.

Harry hums. Ganz is efficient and decisive. She’s been at it for half an hour now and he hasn’t spotted a single mistake. He is probably faster than her, but “She doesn’t leave openings. There’s nothing to hit.”

Nothing except her shields. Damn she's good. They won't reach her level before they enter the arena. A few months of training will not outstrip a lifetime of tutors. Whatever natural talent Harry and Hermione can scrounge up won't be an equaliser when Ganz clearly has talent in spades, too.

Ganz is a duelling specialist. One-on-one is her speciality. Fighting her that way – on her terms, against her strengths – is stupid. Duelling has a lot of crossovers with fighting, and Ganz is still formidable, but she didn't excel nearly so much in Moody's class against three opponents.

"Creativity and teamwork," Harry says. But identifying the right approach is one thing, applying it is a whole other challenge. They need practice. Which means they need to get *Snape* to cooperate. Harry can feel the headache already.

Harry checks if Romanov is still doing the same thing, just in time to see him smash through a trainer's shield.

Romanov signals an end to the match. He swaps out with Bronner. Harry hasn't seen those two apart. He isn't sure if they were friends before this, but Delacour messing with them at the Ball certainly didn't divide them.

Bronner isn't as powerful as Romanov. He makes up for it by fighting smarter. There are a lot of similarities in their styles. Either they practice together often, or they learnt from the same teacher. Perhaps the same trainer, perhaps the standard Durmstrang teachers. Harry will compare to the other students.

Romanov catches him looking and sneers. "Like what you see, Potter?"

His manner is not playful in the slightest. Harry's lips quirk. He nudges Hermione and whispers. "Think we should tell him how that sounded?"

"Harry," she chides. "It's not his first language."

Romanov glares. "You have something to say to me?"

Oh, why not. "What you said, it sounds like flirting."

Romanov flushes. "I was not flirting with you."

"I figured as much," Harry says. He turns back to Ganz – the biggest

threat in the room, not just the loudest.

Romanov puffs up his chest and swaggers over. Harry thinks a peacock might fit him better than a rhino, although the height checks out. Romanov is over a foot taller than Harry. Harry stares with vague disinterest at his chin rather than strain his neck to meet his eyes.

“Potter. The legacy champion, they call you,” he scoffs. “Hogwarts has gone to the dogs. So little talent that they have to recycle old material.”

Oh, that was decently clever. Durmstrang has a high standard of bully than Hogwarts. Except Bellatrix. Bellatrix is just the worst.

“Neither of your parents had what it takes to be a victor. You are the son of blood traitors, pah. Selfish, weak, cowardly. You are just like them. I can see it. You cannot even look me in the eye.”

Hmm. Does Harry want to pick this fight? He should at least *try* to get to the arena without giving each Blood Supremacist a reason to hate his guts.

Harry exchanges a look with Hermione and they agree to do the smart thing, long term. That is unsatisfying. Also, difficult. Harry can think of a dozen things he wants to say to make it worse, but nothing that will make Romanov back off when the boy is itching for a fight. Harry has to say something. Ignoring Romanov is not going to deescalate now that he’s decided silence is a weakness to prod at.

“And you,” Romanov spares Hermione a dismissive look. “I do not even remember your name.”

“If you wanted an introduction, you just had to ask,” Harry says. Romanov misses the insinuation.

“She cannot speak for herself?” Romanov says smugly. He probably thinks she’s intimidated to silence. Harry knows better. If Hermione opens her mouth right now, something witty and cutting is going to fall out and then fists will fly. The professor might be surprised to know that Hermione starts more fights than Ron.

“Do you mean the flirting this time?” Harry tilts his head, struck by inspiration.

“What?” Romanov flushes again. He looks bewildered, as he should, because there was nothing suggestive in his words. He should call

Harry's bluff or call him an idiot. He doesn't. That's three for three. Romanov has no ear for subtext in English. A plan unspools in Harry's mind. It's got a higher-than-average chance of getting him punched but at least it'll be funny.

Harry turns to Hermione to hide his grin. "I'm getting mixed signals. I mean, twice is a coincidence, but he also keeps trying to get my attention. That's quite flirty, isn't it?"

"It is something an admirer would do," Hermione says.

"I am not flirting with you!"

"Are you sure?" Harry says and hopes earnestness will compensate for the sheer absurdity of that question. He wants to keep Romanov off-balance but it's a fine line to walk. If Harry pushes too far there is fight-or-flight-mode on one side, and on the other is Romanov realising Harry is messing with him. Less is more. If he can manage the perfect balance, Romanov will be too confused to push. It's how Luna gets away with being a cryptid.

"I insulted you and your parents!"

"Huh? No, you said I'm just like my parents and that something I'm proud of," Harry makes sure to look especially confused.

"It's common for boys to insult the object of their affection or pull their hair, before they develop proper social skills," Hermione says.

Harry bites back a grin. Before Romanov realises he should be offended, Harry gasps dramatically. "Hold on, do you think that means Malfoy likes me?"

It is not difficult to look appalled at the idea, even while Harry is entertained by imaging Malfoy, wherever he is, doing a spit take at that.

"Malfoy must like me and Ron as well. Goodness," Hermione manages a straight face.

"That is *wild*," Harry shakes his head. "I need to sit down. Do you think Pomfrey has a forgetfulness potion?"

"That's not how forgetfulness potions work."

"Blunt force trauma?"

“Do not perpetuate misconceptions about amnesia. I know you’ve covered as much in your healing lessons.”

“Maybe I forgot I learnt it. Wouldn’t that be ironic?”

“For goodness’ sake, Harry. The solution is clearly to obliviate each other.”

“No, see, if I obliviate you, then how will you know what it is you need to make me forget?”

“Hmm, I see your point.”

“Well, Romanov, let me know when you decide if you’re flirting or not. We’ve got places to be,” Harry says.

Romanov is *almost* too baffled and flustered to try to stop them leaving.

Romanov takes a step to intercept them, and Harry raises a dubious eyebrow. He only needs a little push. “Did you want to come with us? You could sit with me at lunch, I suppose.”

Romanov freezes. “No!”

“You’re right, that’s probably a bad idea,” Harry says. “I’ll be seeing you, then. But not *seeing you* seeing you. So many euphemisms in this language. I understand why you’re confused. Bye now.”

They make it to the closest staircase. A quick look behind reveals omnioculars but no other stalkers – they’re not being followed. Harry cannot take a step further without releasing some energy. He slumps against Hermione and giggles.

“Shh!” Hermione hisses. It comes out as a stuttering gasp as she is similarly afflicted by humour.

“I can’t–” breathe “believe I said that. Can’t believe *you* said that.”

“*I* can’t believe it worked.”

It probably won’t more than once. Romanov won’t be so off-balance a second time. A shame. It was so worth it. The mental image of Romanov’s poleaxed expression sets Harry off again.

They are very late to Healing, but luckily only Hermione is keeping track of the schedule.

…

Slughorn stands in front of a large cauldron.

“A witch or wizard with an intuitive understanding of potions is a formidable force in the Games. By scavenging a few innocuous ingredients can create magic far greater than the sum of its parts. Poisons, salves, tonics, grenades and more!” Slughorn’s stomach wobbles with his excitement. “You’d know all about the wonders of potions with your mentor, eh Harry?”

Harry smiles weakly. “Right.”

“There will be plenty of creatures to harvest in the arena, don’t you worry about that.”

Hermione raises her hand. “Will there be non-native plants, too?”

“History would suggest you will be able to find exotic plants in areas where it is warmer or dryer than usual, yes,” Slughorn winks.

Right. So in the biomes they set up for the extra special monsters.

Harry considers whether he’d fight a sphinx for some dittany for healing potions. Maybe not. That seems like a circular problem.

“Let’s test your memory, then. Write down as much of the Blood Replenisher recipe you remember.”

Hermione, of course, gets through the whole thing.

Harry checks against hers and discovers a few of his steps are in the wrong order and there are a couple missing lines. Harry has had a lot of experience with getting potions wrong. He things his recipe might clot blood. Maybe too much. He isn’t sure if it’ll creates big clots and cause a stroke, or if it’d just use up all the clotting agents which, the healing lesson he just left helpfully informed him, will mimic the effects of some fun snake venoms that make a person bleed out of every orifice up to their eyeballs. So not a great blood replenisher, no. The “oh dear” it gets from Slughorn just confirms it.

…

“I don’t think I’m cut out for advanced potions,” Harry says, helping himself to the vegetables. The elves are serving a roast for dinner. It’s the perfect meal to welcome his appetite back. “I don’t have the

intuition."

"Intuition isn't a mystical force granted to other people. You build it," Hermione says.

Harry nods. "It's expertise. Thousands of hours of experience sitting on top a foundational encyclopaedic knowledge of all possible ingredients and their properties and common reactions in recipes."

"Recipes and ingredients that we've come across in the last six years," Hermione raises an eyebrow. "I did tell you homework was important."

Harry did his homework. He points his fork at her. "Right! But passion is the glue that makes it *stick*." It's an old argument. Hermione has never met a scrap of knowledge she didn't want to hoard. Most people are not like that. Each year, Harry forgot whatever he'd studied for potions exams before the trolly lady reach their compartment to offer them snacks. It's been that way since first year. Snape's tutelage is nothing like brewing or cooking with his mum – Harry does not enjoy brewing under Snape, and he's never cared about the theoretical side of the subject. "I will cram recipes and common substitutions into my brain. That's the best I can do."

Hermione straightens. "But substitutions are *fascinating*."

"Aren't they?" Roger says. "You'll never guess what Wiggleman's variant of the Allergy Cure uses instead of adder fangs – the first ingredient is a *plant*, of all things."

"Surely a carnivorous species."

"Nope," Roger says.

'Nope' sums up Harry's opinion of the direction the conversation has taken. He scans the hall. Riddle isn't here yet. It makes Harry's neck prickle – he doesn't know why, and that makes it worse.

Harry keeps the door in the corner of his eye while Hermione and Roger's words flow over him.

Most of the other champions are present, still grouped by school, sticking to the familiar. Delacour is an exception; apparently, she prefers to eat quickly alone. All other Beauxbatons students except Mazet and Gauthier are at the Ravenclaw table.

The Durmstrang group is larger than Harry expected. In previous Games they're usually a much higher portion of Supremacists. They've only contributed three so far, but it is still early. What's more important than who's joined them is who *hasn't*. Harry does not want to deal with Bellatrix and Riddle *and* Ganz together. No sign of that disaster, yet. Ganz is with Durmstrang rather than the Supremacists.

The Supremacists have claimed the Slytherin table, of course. Romanov is doing an admirable job of keeping a wary eye on Harry while also avoiding meeting his eyes and appearing completely unbothered by his presence. It's more subtle than anything he's seen from Romanov yet. But the boy is still right on the edge of composure.

Harry doesn't wink at him. He wants that on record. He has some self-restraint.

"Isn't that right Harry?" Hermione says.

"Hmhmm," Harry hums an affirmative and assumes she won't hold him to it if he's just promised his first-born.

Harry's eyes snap to movement as Riddle enters the hall. Some tension eases out of Harry's shoulders, to his surprise, and he almost stabs a forkful of potato into his nose.

Harry tilts his head. Riddle has looked more dangerous than ever since this morning when he joined the Supremacists. That hasn't changed. Harry isn't happy to see him, precisely, but the prickling feeling is gone.

Ah, that's it. Harry would rather Riddle not be in the Games at all, but if Riddle must be here, Harry wants him where he can see him and any of the nasty surprises he might send Harry's way.

That goes for all the Supremacists. Sure, all the other champions are his competition, but the Supremacists are the enemy. The Supremacists want one victor, even though the Ministry allows multiple survivors. But there is no limit to how many survivors are allowed. Everyone could survive if they worked together. And in that case, the Supremacists are outnumbered three to one.

Harry likes those odds.

…

"You've made next to no progress. You protect your mind with wet

tissue paper. It's a wonder it hasn't leaked out of your ears." Snape says. Harry massages his forehead and doesn't glare at Snape, but only because that would hurt more. "I suppose I should not be surprised. After all, you consistently demonstrate an inability to follow even the simplest. Of. Instructions." Dread trickles down Harry's spine. He doesn't know for sure where this is going, but he can guess. "Remind me what I said about attending the fighting lessons?"

The thing Harry hates most about Snape is how he makes Harry participate in his torment. "Not to go."

"Then why did you go, not only to combat class yesterday, but duelling today?"

"We didn't duel. We were just watching."

"I recall saying that watching –"

"Ganz was there. We needed to see her at some point."

"Do not interrupt me," Snape says dangerously.

"Harry," Hermione says. She shakes her head.

Harry grits his teeth and takes a deep breath.

"Do you think I enjoy wasting my breath and my time?" Snape says.

Harry keeps his mouth shut. He stares at a point over Snape's shoulder.

"I suppose you think slinging your weight around is more important than secrecy and strategy, just like your father."

How his dad and Snape didn't kill each other, Harry has no idea. Harry meets his gaze. Snape's eyes narrow.

"You intend to continue to disobey me?" Snape says softly.

Harry raises his chin. "Yes." Hermione puts her head in her hands. "I *will* practice fighting. If you want me to do it in secret, then fine–" Harry spreads his arms to encompass how much of their private room is *not* taken up with other people. "But otherwise, I'm going to the training classes because I'd rather give away some secrets than learn nothing at all. What will be a waste of your time is teaching us occlumency only for Delacour to take us down with a curse or two."

“You stupid–”

“Severus,” McGonagall says.

Snape straightens. A muscle in his jaw ticks. Abruptly, he strides away. But before he reaches the door, he turns back with a swirl of his cloak.

“I tire of this. Draw your wand, Potter. If you want to duel, we’ll duel.”

Harry’s headache spikes at his sudden movement. Despite that, he’s eager. If he can hit Snape with a single curse, this whole tournament might be worth it.

Hermione and Professor McGonagall take refuge on the edge of the room. Harry eyes the omnioculars. “Hold anything back?”

“From your competitors,” *you idiot*, Snape leaves unsaid. “Your adoring fans need rather more persuasion. Your personality certainly isn’t sufficient.”

Snape bows stiffly. Harry follows suit, and he’s off-balance when a stinging jinx flashes right for his face.

Harry tilts his head and the spell sails past his ear. He completes the bow, deeper and more mocking than before. If Snape is going to be a brat, so is he.

“Don’t take your eyes off your opponent, boy.”

“I *didn’t*,” Harry protests. That is, in fact, how he managed to dodge. A pointless argument. Harry breaths out. Then, it’s on.

The start is straightforward, probing. Harry’s heartrate picks up and time slows. They exchange a volley of spells. Snape casts like five people put together. Harry is used to fighting five people, but he’s used to the fight getting easier as he takes them out one by one. Snape’s defence is rock solid. His shields have full coverage and Harry’s poking hasn’t discovered any weak spots.

Faster and faster. Snape hasn’t had to dodge anything Harry’s sent him, yet. Snape knows all the esoteric counters to Harry’s shield poppers, and more besides – he fires back Dark things that would go straight through a protego if Harry was stupid enough to stand behind one.

When Snape fires a bone-breaker curse, Harry realises it's *that* kind of lesson. Harry reflects a vomiting hex, and without warning, it's like a switch is flipped. Snape *moves*.

Suddenly, there's a conjured snake snapping at Harry's ankles and the floor turns to ice beneath his feet.

It's only by the grace of Harry's unnatural speed that he isn't defeated instantly.

He ignores the snake; venom doesn't kill immediately. The floor is a much bigger problem – Harry's whole fighting style is built around agility – if he trips, he's toast.

The ice doesn't respond to the most powerful finite he can muster. Harry batters away a jinx and banishes the snake into the path of a curse he can't shield – now he's out of backups and time. He transfigures the ice into water, just in time to dodge a nasty purple spell.

Harry expected to be the underdog, heading into this. He didn't think he would defeat Snape, but he was optimistic about fighting to a stalemate; being that annoying little shit that Snape tried and failed to crush. He's now realising just how outclassed he is. It doesn't mean it's impossible to endure, but he'll need to be clever about it.

"Lumos maxima!" Harry shouts. He hides a silent stunning spell in the glare. Snape doesn't fall for it.

Harry disillusions himself and races across the room while Snape is blinking stars out of his eyes. Snape's next spells miss by feet instead of millimetres.

Harry tries all the tricks he picked up in the DA. He transfigures Snape's shoes to mousetraps, he summons his cloak to knock him off-balance, he conjures swooping birds and trip lines, he targets one of the hovering omnioculars and tries to drop it on Snape's head, he lays traps which don't work nearly as well when your opponent sees where you put them. Everything short of jumping out of a tree. Snape is unphased by his efforts.

Harry casts a bright green spell and – Snape flinches. He steps sideways into a quicksand trap, sinks to his knees before he banishes the sand with a negligent wave of his hand.

Green paint splatters the wall behind where he stood. Snape is

dangerously calm. “What was that.”

“Paint.” Harry lowers his wand slowly. He’s not sure what’s happening. The duel might be over?

It’s not a particularly useful spell, the best Harry could hope for is to get paint in Snape’s eyes, but Harry’s scraping the bottom of the barrel, here. It’s not the weirdest thing he’s tried.

“Do you think you’re funny, Potter?”

“Huh?”

“Dismissed. Granger! Get over here.”

Hermione ducks out from behind the stone barricade Professor McGonagall transfigured for cover.

“You’ve got this,” Harry tells her as they swap places. Several of the hovering omnioculars close in and flock after him. An excitable one gets in his face and flies backwards to keep him in view. It pre-empts all attempts to walk around it.

Harry drops his graze under the weight of that keen focus and tries not to think about how many people will be watching the daily highlights.

“Very good, Mr Potter,” Professor McGonagall says with fierce pride. He's pretty sure he’s supposed to be ready with a witty line or personal anecdote to suck up to the audience. “Quick reflexes and quick thinking – an excellent combination.”

He grins tiredly. He realises he’s panting and sweating. The ache of a dozen little injures are starting to make themselves known. Well. He did learn some diagnostic spells and how to heal cuts and bruises earlier that morning. He pauses at some puncture wounds on his calf.

“Professor, are conjured snakes venomous?”

“If the caster wants them to be.”

Harry doesn’t know any spells to scan for poison, so he considers what he knows about Snape. “I need to see Madam Pomfrey.”

Several omnioculars vibrate excitedly and trail after him. The door stays stubbornly shut until he puts his wand in his holster.

…

Pomfrey is not impressed. “A deadly snake. Honestly.” She scowls at the glowing blue diagnostic trace branching up his leg. “Drink this.”

Harry grimaces at the taste. He imitates her wand movements with his finger. She corrects his pronunciation.

“Say, if I was in the wilderness and I didn’t have a ready-made potion on hand, how would I fix this?”

“Bezoar, if you have generous sponsors. They’re better for ingested poisons but it’d keep you alive. Or a tincture of ground unicorn horn and crushed mistletoe berries would do the trick. If you have no supplies, hmm. Well, conjured venom will vanish on its own eventually. Venom is usually spread by the lymphatic system. There is a spell to constrain lymphatic flow to the limb,” she demonstrates, “which is dangerous if you leave it too long, but several hours should be enough for the conjured poison to vanish. You’d want a general regeneration agent like dittany to repair the damage from the venom and the constriction spell, but you’d keep the leg in mostly working order.”

“Hello, Madam Pomfrey,” Hermione says.

Pomfrey looks up sharply at the pain in her voice. “Where are you hurt?”

“My wrist,” Hermione says, face pale.

“Ah, it’s broken. Not to worry, I can fix that in a jiffy.”

She really can. A couple of spells and Hermione is good as new, and both Harry and Hermione are released.

“What happened?” Harry asks, angry more than surprised Snape’s acceptable teaching side effects include light maiming.

“I got clipped with a bone-breaker curse. Professor Snape was too quick for me.” Hermione sounds more upset about falling short of her expectations than getting injured. “I tried left-handed casting, but I couldn’t keep up. He overpowered my shield and stunned me.”

“We’ll work on it,” Harry reassures. By themselves, if they have to.

Snape and Professor McGonagall are outside the hospital wing. Snape

does not look impressed. “You were correct. Without extensive training you will be utterly hopeless.”

That’s not true. Harry might not be on par with Ganz or Bellatrix, but he can handle Romanov. Hermione is almost as good. Accurate feedback is important. Harry knows he made mistakes, and he needs it to improve, but he’ll have to ask McGonagall when Snape isn’t around, because his mentor is an active hindrance. Merlin, why couldn’t it be literally anyone else.

Harry will give Snape a chance to train them properly. A few days. Snape is a good fighter. Not as good as Moody, but close. If Snape decides to teach, he’ll be useful. If all he does is beat Harry up, they’ll use McGonagall instead.

Harry is going back to combat and duelling classes, regardless. Snape was right about one thing: there are always other champions attending, especially with the bloodthirsty sorts, and they’re the ones Harry is particularly invested in deceiving. He needs them to underestimate him. If they think they can take him one-on-one, he’ll be fine. If they gang up on him… well. But Harry is sure he can get the Supremacists to underestimate him.

“Is that all? Sir.” Snape can interpret that as asking for feedback or a dismissal. At this point, Harry isn’t fussy.

Snape narrows his eyes at Harry’s tone.

“What shield spells block the bone-breaker?” Hermione asks.

Snape is silent. Harry wonders if he’ll tell them. Harry *will* get an answer. He’ll learn the curse and cast it at Snape to get a practical demonstration if that’s what it takes.

“A conjured physical shield. Pure platinum is the most effective for Dark curses, but I imagine anything above scrap iron is beyond either of you.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Hermione says. She drags Harry by the wrist to the library before he can say anything stupid.

…

“Transfiguration. Conjuration. Materials. Metals – here!”

Harry holds out his arms and Hermione stacks them full of books.

“We’ll start with conjuring the metal and try to get it in the right shape later,” Hermione says, flipping through a book, effortlessly navigating the shelves with her head down. “Let’s allocate, say, thirty minutes now for some reading and we’ll try it under Professor McGonagall’s guidance in the morning.”

Only thirty minutes. Hermione must be tired.

Harry certainly is. His arms ache all too soon under the books. He is relieved to deposit the pile on Hermione’s favourite table.

“Pardon me. Where is the bestiary section?”

Harry and Hermione look up at Fleur Delacour.

Harry freezes. There are no trainers around to catch her bewitching them; she could do anything.

“It’s on the third row from the right, about halfway along,” Hermione says.

Fleur frowns. “I found that section. There are not many books. Are you certain there is not also a second location?”

“Other than the Restricted Section, no,” Hermione says tersely. Although, a bit of a misnomer now – it’s not restricted during the tournament.

“I will try there.” Then, belatedly, “Merci.”

Harry only stares a little as she walks away. He waits for it to seize his mind, but his head stays clear, and he lets himself breathe.

“Few books! It’s the biggest library in Europe!” Hermione hisses under her breath.

“She didn’t try anything,” Harry says.

“Hmm?”

“Delacour. With her veela thing. She didn’t use it. I didn’t feel anything at all.”

“Not even the passive attraction?” Hermione leans forward. “Do you remember, I asked you to describe Fleur and Cedric? You used a visual description of Fleur and tactile adjectives for Cedric. There’s a subconscious association, there.”

“Yeah.” Between the two, Harry would rather hug Cedric. But that might be because Delacour is about as cuddly as a cactus.

“Is it a pattern? Does it reflect how you feel about men and women in general?”

Harry has been considering that question in his rare scraps of free time since the ball. He likes Oliver Wood and Ginny Weasley. He thinks Cho Chang and Cedric Diggory are attractive, but he’s attracted to Tom Riddle. There’s a difference. He’s not sure exactly why or how, only that he’s got bad taste.

Riddle doesn’t even play Quidditch.

“Maybe?” Harry shrugs. “I’m definitely not straight.”

Hermione nods. “Regardless, you have a strong will, which is certainly necessary to throw off a mental attack. It may be helped along by an inclination towards men and an aversion to Fleur Delacour personally. Add a little occlumency training and you should be safe from her active allure, soon.”

“Can’t happen soon enough,” Harry mutters.

Chapter End Notes

> I hope you guys enjoyed the build up, because the next two chapters is where we see it pay off. It's been too long since Riddle has been a bastard and we need to restore the natural order.

Day four, five, six

Chapter Summary

> Harry, you're drooling.

Chapter Notes

> Time to add some heat to Harry/Riddle relationship. I love this chapter and the next one. Just saying. So much fun.
> The ending for this one is little cliffy, so if that kinda thing annoys you, you might want to wait for the next update (should be mid-week).
>
> Sorry this update was a bit late. On a surprisingly related note - did you know quokkas can be viciously territorial?

Harry is restless in the morning. His nerves are not helped by Bellatrix lounging in the best armchair, musing about which murder methods she will practice today. That wakes Harry up quick smart. He knows she's playing mind games, but that doesn't make them less effective. The common room used to be a safe retreat from the Slytherin bullies. Six years of comfort is difficult and painful to unlearn, but it is excellent impetus to learn other things. Hermione quizzes him on wandless magic through the corridors, on the way to meet Snape and McGonagall before breakfast.

He can't focus enough to satisfy Snape in occlumency practice – no surprises there, it's an impossible bar – but he struggles with Professor McGonagall's lesson more than he'd like. He's usually much better at transfiguration than this.

"Oppilo ferrum!" The iron is more of a sphere than a disk.

"Move your wrist faster through the flick. The spin helps distribute the material further from the centre. Don't go too far, or you'll have a hole in the middle," Professor McGonagall says.

"Oppilo ferrum!" It's better. Not as big as he'd like. He'd have to be very precise to block anything.

They've got a long way to go. The denser the metal, the better the shield but the harder it is to conjure. Iron is no stronger than protego. Silver will stop mild dark curses. Lead will stop most. Platinum will

block almost anything short of the Unforgivables.

The thing is, Harry can already conjure a lead shield– if he allows a minute for it to fully materialise. Not so useful for blocking spells. Entire fights often don't even last that long.

To call a platinum shield in a practical timeframe… that's beyond anything Harry has ever cast. It makes the patronus look like child's play.

"I should just transfigure my clothes to platinum armour at the start of the fight and not have to worry about this," Harry mutters.

Snape swoops in gleefully, which is always the clearest sign Harry has just said something wrong.

"Tell me, Potter. Do you think we summon floating shields for the aesthetic? Can you not fathom a single reason why you would not want to touch something that is conducting a deadly curse?"

"Conduct? Like lightning?"

"Do I need to repeat myself?"

"Yes, Mr Potter, like lightning. And unpleasant to touch for much the same reason," Professor McGonagall interrupts Snape with a quelling look. As usual, Snape backs down momentarily. Harry wishes it was permanent. But though she may purse her lips at the phrasing, McGonagall defers to Snape when his expertise outshines hers. "Now, try copper. The incantation is 'oppilo aes'."

Harry slowly works his copper disk formation from ten seconds down to two without proportionally decreasing it in size. Two seconds is not fast enough for a duel.

The day does not improve. At breakfast, Trelawny tells him in cheerful tones that he's going to be betrayed by someone he trusts. Harry wishes she'd stick to forecasting the weather.

By the end of breakfast, Harry is distracted, frustrated and annoyed. Hermione takes one look at him and decides to start the morning with healing lessons. Healing is likely the best of a bad lot, but the idea of trying to memorise a dozen spells while his head is pounding makes Harry want to throw up. On the way, they pass the gym and Harry sees something through the door that stops him in his tracks.

A punching bag.

Hermione means well. She uses books and lessons to feel in control and calm. When Hermione is angry, she wants to learn something new.

When Harry is angry, he wants to hit something. He doesn't, because punching people is what bullies do, and Gryffindors only attack in defence of their friends, and detentions are boring, and everyone says violence doesn't solve problems. But restraint doesn't fix it either – he still wants to hit something. He bottles it up until he can't contain it and ends up shouting at someone who doesn't deserve it.

It strike him suddenly, that he's never tried actually hitting something, to see if it would feel as good as his itching fists suggest it would. No one can say he's not supposed to hit a punching bag.

"You go ahead. I'll join you later," Harry tells Hermione.

The gym isn't the most popular room. Right now, it's empty except for the trainers.

Harry goes straight for the punching bag. He hits it a few times. It's solid, heavy.

"There's a spell to wrap your hands. Modified bandage charm," a trainer says. He's keeping a polite distance. It gives the impression he's watching because he's got nothing else to do, rather than that it's his job.

"Show me?"

The bandages help. Harry can punch harder. He can feel the strain in his back and shoulders, instead of just his fingers.

It's simple. It hurts enough to drag his focus back if it wanders.

It feels good.

"It's more satisfying to hit something that hits back."

Harry pauses.

The trainer is wrapping his own hands. "What do you say, champion?"

"Potter. Or Harry. Not champion," Harry says.

“Well, Potter. Do you want to spar?” The trainer’s grin is confident; he knows the answer. It reminds Harry of Bill Weasley.

“What’s your name?”

“Ewan McLaggen.”

Harry looks for resemblance but can’t spot the smarmy ego which defines the only other McLaggen he knows. “Nice to meet you. Let’s spar.”

McLaggen is a good instructor. He shows Harry how to stand and some basic moves which they put immediately into practice. They build up speed and power. McLaggen isn’t afraid to belt him around. He’s got a high opinion of what Harry can handle.

Harry leaves grinning. He’s bruised, sweaty and something deep inside him is settled.

Harry’s lessons go smoothly and productively for the rest of the day. He joins Hermione in the healing room and continues basic first aid. A lot of healing is plant-based, so they spend the whole afternoon in the potions room, identifying plants and learning how to improvise useful potions out of whatever they might find in the arena. Snape has nothing worse than usual to say about his occlumency attempts. Harry manages to cast the copper shield fast enough to block some of Snape’s hexes in their duel. He fights to a stalemate, which makes Snape’s eye twitch and that is the highlight of his day.

Harry returns to the gym the next morning. He runs the agility course while McLaggen tries to hex him off. It’s the most fun he’s had since the Games started.

Snape says he’s wasting his time. Snape can go sit on his wand. A workout in the morning steadies Harry for the rest of the day. The Supremacists’ faces don’t piss him off half as much. He doesn’t jump at shadows. He can focus. He learns faster in other classes. Harry doesn’t care if wrestling is useless in duels, the gym might just keep him sane.

Which is just as well, because occasionally something will happen and everyone else clearly considers it normal, while the sheer disconnect makes Harry feel like everything has tilted sideways into an entirely different world. Then Harry realises the problem is he’s surrounded by lunatics, and he worries it might be catching.

Healer Hopkirk blinks with a complete lack of comprehension.

Harry's question wasn't that complicated. He tries to reword it. "Are skulls different? I imagine a bone breaker to the head would cause more damage to the brain than a concussion, so what would I need to do?"

"You would be unconscious until you died. You would not be able to heal yourself," Hopkirk says.

"Not me – someone else."

More blinking. "Someone else?"

"My friends. Allies. We can still heal each other."

"Oh, I suppose so," Hopkirk says like this is a small revelation.

Hopkirk agrees to teach him the spell, or spell series, really. Brains are complicated. There are spells for reducing swelling and repairing tissue damage and relieving pressure, and those are just the ones you need if nothing goes wrong.

The pressure spell is particularly finicky. Harry practices on a balloon, trying to get it to swell and shrink in turn. Most of the time it pops. Harry imagines trying it on a dying friend and his hand shakes.

"It is a difficult spell," Hopkirk says after half an hour of little progress. "Your dedication is admirable. But just keep in mind that sometimes kinder to help a friend pass with peace and dignity than try to keep them clinging to life."

And then he teaches Harry several painless ways to euthanise people.

"The killing curse is instantaneous, faster than the body can process pain so there is no doubt it is a kind way to die, but it is quite tricky. A tincture of valerian, yarrow and pixie wings will produce a strong anaesthetic, and an overdose, say 100mL, will put someone to sleep and then cease brain activity. Of course, any lethal spell will be painless if you use a pain-relieving spell first. Let's try that? The incantation is 'leniens', no particular wand movement."

"Leniens," Harry repeats. Hopkirk nods at his pronunciation.

"The pain-relieving effects get stronger with intent and practice. It's not a perfect spell, mind. Won't cancel out a torture curse," Hopkirk says. "So you wouldn't want to cremate your patient. Something like a heart attack curse or a cutting charm to the neck would do it. A

sleeping spell won't interfere with it, if you want to use that as well. Give it a try."

"Leniens," Harry casts. A white light shoots into the wall.

"Well done," Hopkirk smiles. "There, isn't that easier than brain surgery?"

Harry stares. Then stares some more. "Right."

Of *course* it is easier to mute nerves than fix cascade brain trauma, and that there is the worst reason to kill someone that Harry has heard today, which is saying something.

…

Harry keeps an eye on the other champions for the next couple of days. The Blood Supremacists seem to have settled for now. No new recruits yet. He saw Stoeva approach Ganz, only to be soundly rebuffed. Thank Merlin.

But that still leave them more powerful than the Hogwarts alliance. Harry would need more people on his side to take them head-on. He thinks Krum might be an option. Krum and Hermione have been chatting more frequently, and he seems amenable enough, it's just a question of trustworthiness.

Amelia emerged from the magical creature class yesterday totting the tiny Durmstrang girl, Görder, and they haven't parted much, since. It makes sense that they'd connect easier with each other – they're the only two champions younger than fifteen, besides Gauthier, but he's hanging out with the Supremacists. As far as Harry is concerned, Görder is welcome to hide behind him until the Games are over. But she's twelve; she not exactly going to level the playing field. Moody certainly doesn't think so – he mentioned something indelicate about adopting liabilities the last time Harry and Roger were in his class. Harry isn't convinced. Her age doesn't make her useless. Everyone has something to offer. Moody is paranoid, and if he was a champion he'd go it alone, like Fleur Delacour and Gaspard Poulin, before risking anyone stabbing him in the back.

Harry is more concerned about the champions who don't care which part of him they stab, in or outside the arena.

Bellatrix. He's talking about Bellatrix.

And Umbridge. She keeps popping up in his classes, quill poised to catch him doing something wrong. Dobby has taken to warning Harry when she's coming to inspect one of his lessons. Harry loves that elf.

But mainly, Bellatrix. So far, she's all talk and not-so-veiled insults and stray spells during training that tend to go Harry's way more often than accident dictates. Honestly, she was worse in school.

And he knows she's still talking about him, because the other Supremacists start smirking at him in the hallways, like they know Bellatrix broke his arm when she cursed that banister to grab him. Or maybe she told them about the time someone –someone who didn't get caught but could only be Bellatrix or Malfoy and Malfoy hasn't got the balls– ahem, *someone* plucked Hedwig bald, hogtied her and made her appear in front of Harry at the Gryffindor table at dinner.

Bellatrix likes that story. Brings it up all the time. Seems to think the outcome of the little prank was hilarious. Harry trying to free Hedwig and comfort her at the same time, struggling to see through is tears, struggling to work when his hands were shaking horror and fury, struggling alone because anyone else got bitten or clawed to pieces. Flailing in panic and pain, Hedwig even caught him a few times. All whilst the professors were trying to stop all-out war from erupting between Slytherin and Gryffindor which was only assuaged in the end because the stunt was even too twisted for most of Slytherin to get behind.

Yes, quite hilarious. Just the kind of tale Harry wants bandied about for mandatory international viewing. If the Supremacists do know, they seem to fall on Bellatrix's side of it. Says a lot about them.

But Bellatrix hasn't pulled anything like that since the start of the Games. Harry is fairly sure it's because Bellatrix is busy jockeying for position in the Supremacist alliance and filling the gaps in her education now that there are no restricted subjects. Harry didn't even see her during training hours until the fourth day, where he watched around a doorway as she learnt to direct a forest fire to flush the trainers out of hiding. He immediately bumped smothering spells to the top of his to-do list.

But in under a week, Bellatrix has established herself as the top dog, so her social circle isn't going to keep her busy much longer. And she's a year older than Harry – he doesn't know what she was like in class, how interested she is in studying. It's hard to gauge how she'll weigh learning new murder techniques against the long-favoured pastime of

tormenting Harry. But Harry doesn't expect the reprieve to last much longer. There are already signs of change. The Supremacists don't travel as one large posse anymore. Bellatrix is loosening the leash – a sign of confidence, surely. Bellatrix wouldn't let them out of her sight if she believed they'd immediately start plotting behind her back.

It is just Bellatrix and Riddle in the warding room on the fifth day. Harry, Hermione and Bellatrix bristle suspiciously at each other. Riddle rolls his eyes and calls the trainer over to test his work. "Flawless!" is the verdict.

Harry doesn't take his eyes off Bellatrix. She sneers. "I thought I smelled something."

A few more nasty comments and the customary greeting is complete. They head to opposite sides of the room and then they're too busy training to bother each other.

Harry doesn't forget the Slytherins are there – not for a moment – and he doesn't relax until Bellatrix and Riddle head to lunch.

Harry's disillusionment and protection charms are playing nicely with each other, so Harry adds an imperturbable charm to is ward ensemble. It suddenly smells alarmingly of burnt hair.

"A little more precision with the flick on the disillusionment charm– that will give it enough fortitude to support the imperturbable charm. Otherwise, you can place the imperturbable charm first– that would be a more stable configuration," the trainer says.

The smell is a small imperfection but a big problem, he supposes. It would show someone is hiding there, and that's inviting someone to break in. Even if you could make the wards unbreakable, though no wards are, you've already lost the first and best defence: invisibility.

Harry cancels the lot so he can start again. It'll be easier than trying to fix it. Warding is finicky business. His ward set goes down like a house of cards – master curse-breaker not required. The silencing spell is interfering with the disillusionment, and that's weakening the imperturbable charm, for some reason.

"Right, why did that happen?" he asks the trainer.

…

"Accio!"

Harry's pillow scoots across the bed and then flies around the room. It's clicked. He's got it.

He falls asleep smiling.

…

Harry knows he's not supposed to be here. Snape would pitch a fit if he knew Harry was back in the combat rooms.

Harry doesn't need to be here – not as pressingly as before. Snape has been grudgingly useful since Harry duelled him, stepping up the practical lessons or just venting his frustration (Harry can't quite tell). Snape has piles of criticism, if not much advice. It might not be the best teaching style, certainly not for Hermione, but Harry always learned fastest with hands-on practice.

The problem is most of the champions spend the full ten hours in between breakfast and dinner learning how to fight. Half hour of duelling practice before and after training each day isn't going to cut it – Harry and Hermione are going to fall behind.

So sometimes Harry asks the combat instructors for advanced lessons and gives a half-hearted effort to perform it, while memorising the technique to try in private later. The rest of the time, Harry listens with half an ear as the fighting instructors teach him things he learnt years ago. He looks woefully incompetent while he uses his other ear for snooping because by far the most useful pastime is watching his competition fight. Learning their styles, their tells, their bad habits and carefully filing the information away for later exploitation.

Harry taught the DA for a year; he's good at judging weaknesses and potential. He knows who he cannot beat in a fair fight: Ganz, Bellatrix, Krum and Delacour. In that order. He can probably duel them to a draw, but he'd be pushing his luck. If he faces a pair of them together, he's toast. And Harry is sure he'll add Riddle somewhere on that list once Harry sees him in action. Of course, in the arena, it won't be a fair fight. Harry doesn't know how that's going to affect things.

The opportunity to answer at least one question arrives by the end of the first week.

Harry is trying to crack a duelling instructor's shield. He knows a couple of curses that would do the trick, mainly from Snape using them against him, but Harry is limiting himself to charms. Trying to finesse his way through the cracks with a stunning spell is an

annoying challenge.

Riddle walks in with the girl power trio from hell; Bellatrix, Stoeva and Mazet.

Harry pauses.

“Champion Potter,” the instructor calls for his attention and reminds him, “Look for the shimmer. Once you locate the weak point, concentrate your spell in a narrow beam.”

Harry makes an especially feeble attempt.

Bellatrix sniggers.

Harry’s hand clenches on his wand and he stares at his fingers in surprise. That’s not normal. Successfully tricking the Blood Supremacists usually gives him the warm fuzzies, not whatever this feeling that twists his stomach and heats his cheeks and gives him the urge to prove to Riddle that he’s strong and clever and –

Oh.

Oh, no.

Well, he’d better keep *that* in check.

Step one: Harry forces himself to meet Riddle’s eyes. Riddle looks between Harry and the shield with amusement.

Why is he amused? Does he think Harry is stupid? Or worse –and it *is* worse, no matter what his stomach has to say about it– does he think Harry’s efforts at deception are transparent and pitiful?

“Aw, the squib decided to show up and start using real weapons,” Bellatrix says in her patented and irritating baby voice.

“He’s progressed from hitting things with sticks,” says Stoeva. Because real witches use goblin silver daggers when they want to get their hands dirty. “I didn’t think his type was so evolved. They’ll be making fire before we know it.”

The girls titter.

Harry can’t let them drive him out of the room. He wants to see Riddle fight.

Harry has got to be boring; not weak enough for them to smell blood, not strong enough to be challenging. If he can make himself less interesting than duelling practice, they'll go away.

Harry turns back to the instructor. He makes a bit more of an effort against the shield. It flickers dangerously.

Unfortunately, the girls don't like being ignored. "Nothing to say, halfblood?"

Harry's silence is confirmation. There's nothing he can say that won't make them worse.

They try a few more taunts. Nothing he hasn't heard before. He lets it annoy him and throw off his casting. Let them think he's prone to distractions.

Harry's patience pays off. Mazet wanders away first. Harry isn't surprised. Bellatrix and Stoeva are tight; Harry sees them everywhere together. They bonded quickly over their common girly interests of murder and dismemberment. Mazet just hangs out on the periphery, occasionally enthusing about the pollution of their ideal society.

Riddle stops watching Harry –and Harry isn't kidding himself; whatever Riddle was looking for, he probably found it– and stares idly around the room before politely losing patience. "Bellatrix, my dear. Shall we warm up?"

"Certainly!" Bellatrix skips to a court. Riddle, escorting her by the elbow, somehow manages to keep pace and look dignified doing it.

They bow to each other. Swirling safety wards pop up around their court, but not before several trainers step in, ready to interfere if they get carried away.

They don't start slow. Spells fly with fury and deadly precision. But it is tame. Duels between champions are restricted to spells that don't cause permanent injury. So the Cutting Charm is fine, limbs can be reattached, but a Cutting Curse is not. Cursed wounds don't play nice with healing magic.

Harry can tell Bellatrix has been classically trained. She's all perfect stances and deadly speed. More focused on brutal spell work than tricks and transfiguration. She fights with the familiarity of something she's been doing her whole life. She grins the whole time, and it's manic, but not her nasty grin. She's having fun.

Riddle keeps up without trouble. He's just as fast. His spell work is perfect; his wand moves with ruthless efficiency, each spell a precise, minimal twist. His posture doesn't have any of the imperfections that plague the self-taught. His oppilo shield is mirror perfect and so solid it rings like a gong. Silver, lead or platinum; Harry isn't sure which because Tom cast it silently. And doesn't *that* make Harry's gut lurch.

They finish their warmup and split to face trainers instead. Bellatrix with a middle-aged woman who is understandably reluctant. Cedric said Bellatrix was firing off Crucios yesterday. Riddle is against– Hold on. That's Harry's trainer. When did he wander off?

There's nothing to give Harry even the pretence of focusing on his training.

Well, then. Blatant staring it is.

Riddle is good. He's *really* good. Harry can't tell straight up who would win between Riddle and Ganz, and she's the European under-seventeen duelling champion.

Harry narrows his eyes. There's something different from the way Riddle was fighting against Bellatrix. It's not that he's opened his repertoire to include nasty curses – and he has, he's firing off more than Harry can recognise. Bellatrix has done that too, but she fights the same as before, just darker.

Realisation hits Harry like lightning: Riddle has changed his *style*.

Riddle fights like he knows what spell the trainer is going to cast next. He's shielding more, focusing on fewer but stronger offensive spells. It's a perfect counter to the trainer, who's faster and more experienced than Bellatrix but not as volatile.

Riddle is adaptable.

It makes shivers run down Harry's spine. Adaptability is what made the Weasley twins such menaces in the DA. It's the trait Harry was trying to cultivate in himself because it's more useful than any spell.

This isn't Riddle's full potential. Creative people don't have an upper limit on potential, just an endless ladder of nasty surprises.

Harry wants to fight him. What strategy would he use against Harry? Harry wants to push him, to throw all his tricks at him and see what he throws back. He wants to see what he can do against the full force

of Riddle's power.

Riddle would win nine times out of ten, but Harry wants to try. He suddenly understands why people want to surf giant waves or climb mountains. Riddle is a force of nature as much as he is a person. Win or lose – the *thrill*.

Riddle casts a stunning spell, so concentrated and precise that it pierces the trainer's shield like a needle, weak points or not.

The trainer drops.

Riddle set that up several moves in advance. It's not the easiest way to win, it's a message. The grin he turns on Harry makes that particularly clear.

Harry is rooted to the spot, Riddle's eyes locked on his. Riddle steps over the trainer. He flicks a negligent rennerverate over his shoulder. Wandlessly. Wordlessly. With his off-hand.

Harry just about swallows his tongue.

"Did you follow that, Harry?" Riddle asks, hair messy, eyes bright, voice curled around his name.

Hurk, Harry's brain helpfully supplies.

"Shield piercing is a finicky bit of magic. If we hadn't arrived, I'm sure you'd have gotten it eventually."

So Riddle does know he's playing weak. Harry is not as annoyed about that as he should be.

Harry runs through an occlumency exercise to get his thoughts back online.

Riddle's brow furrows. No doubt he expects a response.

Observation one: that demonstration proves Riddle's fighting prowess. Observation two: it shows Riddle can do things that Harry cannot. Context: Riddle is his opponent in a fight to the death. Ergo: Riddle is trying to intimidate him.

And he wonders if Harry followed that? Hah! If he wants to make it any more blatant, Riddle had better throw an actual gauntlet.

Well, it doesn't matter how scary he is; fear has never ruled Harry's

behaviour, not even in a defensive reflex to bluff or deny the fear. That's the common expression of bravery, but it's always struck Harry as rather insecure.

But denial is probably what Riddle expects, so Harry finds particular pleasure in replying with complete honesty. "Yeah, yeah, you're scary as fuck."

Riddle gives a startled laugh. His brown eyes light up with delight. "I do enjoy talking to you, Harry. Your… clarity is refreshing."

"How clearly I see you, you mean."

Riddle's grin turns wicked. "Precisely."

It sounds honest because it is honest; all the better for hiding a lie of omission.

"That's not the whole story," Harry realises. Riddle's skill and power are impossible to deny. If he wants recognition, he could get it from anyone.

The artifice slips out of Riddle's grin, leaving something shrewd and intense. Harry wasn't supposed to catch the double meaning.

"Maybe my clarity is a mixed blessing?" Harry says cheekily.

Riddle's lips twitch. He considers for another moment, then says, "Your clarity, yes. How clearly you see me, and how clearly you see yourself. You recognise fear, attraction, anger. You acknowledge every emotion and deny none of them. Do you have any idea how rare that is?"

Hold on– attraction? Is Harry that obvious or can Riddle actually read minds? "I wouldn't know."

"Por qué no los dos?"

"What?" Something something two? Harry knows a lot of nouns and adjectives in romantic languages – similar roots show up in incantations as bastardised Latin – not whatever that was. He doesn't understand.

"Lo sé. Entenderás."

Harry only gets a moment to guess at that new phrase.

“Tom, darling, come train with me,” Bellatrix calls. She wants attention and unless Riddle leaves *right now*, Harry will be in her way, which is not a place Harry particularly wants to be.

Riddle plants his feet with a smirk and crosses his arms. He doesn’t acknowledge Bellatrix, with the predictable consequence of drawing her over. Riddle is a bastard.

Day six

Chapter Summary

Did someone order up a solid 5k of conflict?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Potter,” Bellatrix spits, “Don’t bother Tom.”

Whatever. Harry got the show he wanted. He doesn’t need to stick around.

“My deepest apologies, Riddle,” Harry says and turns to leave.

“Run away to your mudblood girlfriend,” Bellatrix says.

Harry clenches his fists and keeps walking.

“Now, Bella. It’s a large room, we can share. He needs to train more than we do. He could benefit from our experience,” says Riddle.

Bellatrix jumps on his lead. “An excellent idea. Duel me, Potter. Let me show you a real fight.”

“I’ll pass,” Harry says dryly.

“Aw, is baby Potter scared?”

Of course, she won’t let it go. On making the decision to be a bastard, Riddle is now two for two.

Snape told Harry not to duel other champions; it makes your opponent better at fighting you. He probably had this exact combination in mind. Harry isn’t even conflicted – whatever kick Harry gets out of seeing Riddle fight does not carry over to his housemate. Bellatrix is crazy. He’s got no interest in dealing with that.

“Terribly,” Harry lies. Bellatrix is terrifying in the right circumstances, but this isn’t it. She’s halfway across the room. He’ll have ample time to dodge anything she throws at him. She’s not allowed to attack him off the courts. The rule won’t deter her, but the trainers will intercede. Harry can hold her off long enough.

But she steps between Harry and the door.

That's a declaration of intent. "I will not be denied," she hisses.

Harry can't get past her without a confrontation, which is what she wants.

"I'll fight you in the arena. Not before."

"Then you're a coward."

"Maybe I prefer surprises," he says impulsively. Thankfully, her ego neatly filters out his meaning. It doesn't even cross her mind that he could have something worth hiding.

It crosses Riddle's. His smirk is wide and bright as he walks to stand by Harry's shoulder. He's the picture of leisure, hands in pockets, an artful slouch. Harry decides to use him as a meat shield if she attacks.

"Why don't you stand up to her?" Riddle says, loud enough for Bellatrix to hear. She waits on his word and she doesn't seem to know what to do with herself.

Harry doesn't know why Riddle is trying to force this fight, but he won't let it work. The best attack is the move your opponent least wants you to make– Moody Lesson 101.

"Because she'll get more out of it than I will," Harry says.

"Hmm."

"That annoys you."

"I understand pretending to be something you're not," Riddle says, dubiously. "But being content with being overlooked, not getting the respect one deserves?"

"Ah. Deception is admirable as long as it doesn't infringe on ambition." Harry can't resist a dig, "Or ego?"

Riddle isn't the one with ruffled feathers.

"Who are you to speak of ego, with the way you talk to your betters? You brazen, ill-bred worm," Bellatrix hisses.

Harry does not point out the obvious, but he is intrigued by what must be an incredible feat of mental gymnastics to separate Tom sun-shines-

out-of-his-arse Riddle, from muggleborn-scourge-of-the-Earth.

Bellatrix saunters forward. That is a threat. If she gets too close, Harry won't have time to react to an attack.

Harry circles around, keeping her at a distance without backing down. Riddle strolls casually alongside and murmurs, "You're letting her get dangerously close, Harry. It's almost provocative."

"Provocative?" Harry asks, without taking his eyes off Bellatrix. Why is Riddle teasing?

"You look like a naïve little lamb wandering into the jaws of a predator. She thinks she can cast faster than you can defend, at this distance. She thinks you're helpless. Of course, we both know she's wrong."

"You're basing that on my confidence?" Harry says. "Careful, there. We Gryffindors suffer an overabundance of hubris."

Riddle's teeth flash in the corner of Harry's eye. "I don't think that's likely. Mistakes fluctuate. You keep Bella at ten feet, minimum, subconsciously. Six feet for Stoeva, five for Mazet. Fifteen when they're together. It takes experience to calculate the reaction distance of an opponent based only on observing their duels. You've got the instincts of an experienced fighter, Harry."

Riddle smiles at Bellatrix and on that cue she starts approaching again. Harry has his back to the door. If he circles any further, he'll be trapped in the room again. Harry allows her several steps –it is ten feet, damn Riddle– before Harry readies his wand. It's pointed at the ground– not a threat, but a warning that this is as close as Harry will allow and he's willing to strike first, sod the rules.

Bellatrix tilts her head, tracking the movement in a birdlike manner, but she stops. She's taking it seriously, and that's a telling reaction. She's too close to dodge an attack. She's not worried; she thinks she can cast first and that they're close enough that a fight would only have one spell. She doesn't know that Harry's reaction time is quicker than hers; he can still dodge or shield or even retaliate. He has the advantage at close range. There is a narrow window where he's still able to defend and she isn't. *That* is going to be useful.

This has been a very informative afternoon. Well worth the hassle. Provided he can get out of here without blowing it.

“Come on, Harry,” Tom goads. “Take her down a peg. She deserves it. You want to. She tormented you and your friends for years.”

Bellatrix giggles. “Aw, those cute little hexes I threw at you brats in the corridors, you think that’s torment? Too bad for you, we’re playing with big girl spells, now. But that’s enough playing. Duel me, or when it comes time to kill your girlfriend in the arena, I’ll draw it out. She’ll suffer for days. Her screams will keep you up at night. I’ll take her to the final two, so I have something to do – lots of spare time in the arena.”

Harry has a curse at the tip of his tongue and his wand levelled on her heart before he’s even decided to move. Through a red haze, an oddly calm part of his mind notes that her gleeful response is a bad sign. To the rest of his mind, that observation seems unimportant.

Harry has never been this angry. He didn’t know he could. For a moment –and a moment is all it would take– he wants to kill her. He’d do it for the threat: she means it. For Hermione: Bellatrix can’t kill them if he kills her first. For their attempt to control him: they are not going to win, he refuses to let them.

Harry storms past Bellatrix, into the court. Waits impatiently for the trainers. Doesn’t take his eyes off her. He bows and time slows.

“Expelliarmus! Stupefy!” Harry shouts.

The spells scatter off her shield.

Harry dodges her first volley, a vomiting hex and cutting charm. It’s easy. Harry is keeping well back, a more traditional distance than his preferred close range.

She’s limited by the rules to a basic, predictable spell set. She fights like Snape; a bit faster but not as creative, so it’s not difficult to move too slowly to dodge her knockback jinx. It hits like a kick in the chest. Harry lands flat on his back, rolls, wheezes and doesn’t get up.

The trainers call an end to the round. This is not Moody’s fight club, so attacking when your opponent is down is not actively encouraged. Harry doesn’t trust the trainers to act fast enough– he watches Bellatrix through his fringe. Her wand is levelled at his head. He grips his wand tighter, behind his back.

She scoffs. “Is that the best you can do? Get up!”

Ugh.

Harry bows, shallow and insulting.

He sticks with protegos so weak they collapse after every spell Bellatrix casts. He narrowly fends off a knee reversal hex and a stinging hex, and then Bellatrix casts a lesser-known concussion hex that will go straight through a protego.

Harry casts protego.

Damn, that hurts.

He staggers, swaying out of the way of a scalping hex, and yields. The trainers declare the round over.

Riddle claps, mockingly, goadingly.

It's humiliating. Everyone is watching. The omnioculars are recording this for prosperity. It might hurt his standing with the sponsors if they think he is easily rattled, or that his more impressive showing against Snape was scripted.

Harry grits his teeth and finites himself. In his suddenly clear vision, he sees Bellatrix is spitting mad. Harry's stomach sinks. How many times is he going to have to do this?

She stalks back and forth across her side of the court. "You're pathetic Potter, haven't you learnt anything since second year?"

"Protego is a fourth-year charm," Harry protests.

Bellatrix growls.

Harry bites back a vicious grin because he's scoring hits too, she just doesn't know it. Harry isn't her punching bag. A punching bag needs to be firm, and Harry is folding too easily. He's denying her the satisfying fight she wants, and the information Riddle is after. But she's not satisfied with kicking his arse like he'd hoped. That's not ideal. He's so soft it's pissing her off. He could fight a bit harder, but that would give Riddle more information, and at the end of the day, Harry is more afraid of Riddle than Bellatrix.

Unfortunately, that means she's going to get more worked up and unstable and dangerous.

Harry's exit plan is a work in progress. He mentally kicks himself. He

should've agreed to best three out of five at the start.

"You're not even worth the time to take down. Learn how to fight!"

Harry bows.

He lasts longer this time; Bellatrix doesn't give him much choice. She's frustrated and her spells are getting nastier, and there are some things he is not willing to take. Pain he can put up with. Incapacitating spells, like stupefy or impedimenta that will leave him vulnerable to her tender mercies? Not a good idea. Unknown spells? Not a chance.

She tries to close the distance and it goes against his instincts, but for every step forward, he steps back. No need to show off his speed.

He duels like he only knows the most basic shield and two offensive spells. He gets himself boils and antlers, to break up his dodging streak. She casts a wrist reversal hex, and yeah, that'll do.

His bones crack and twist and he drops his wand. The pain burns.

Bellatrix shrieks with rage and her next spell goes so wide that Harry doesn't bother moving. For a moment, he is seriously tempted to dodge *into* the spell, just to see if she'll have an aneurism. But he won't be able to resist laughing, and that will give the game away.

The trainers call an end to the round. Bellatrix casts a dysentery jinx and a dangerous-looking orange hex. The spells aren't dark enough to stop the match– the trainers only tell her to listen more carefully to the stop order. Harry doubts they'd be so lenient with him.

Harry's blood is pumping, flaring white-hot in his wrists with every beat of his heart. Its rate feels normal, to Harry, but considering how slow the rest of the room is, it might be off the charts. It takes eons for the trainers to reach and heal him.

The pain is blurring everything together– his fury, embarrassment and resentment, and a potent dose of *glee*, all hopelessly tangled, building with every moment, winding him tighter and higher.

"The only reason you won't die in the first thirty seconds is because I'm going to keep you around to watch me kill your mudblood." Her wand is twitching, impatient for the trainers to fix his hands and start the next bout. "Even your blood traitor parents put up more of a fight in their games. Professor Snape must be so disappointed in you. I suppose, since he couldn't have your mother, he'll take what he can

get."

It's a good thing Harry's mother taught him to control himself. Under the emotions, a line of clear thought remains. Bellatrix isn't going to stop. There's nothing Harry can say to convince her, so he might as well say nothing. But Riddle could stop her– she'd listen to him.

Harry finds Riddle on the sidelines and bares his teeth. "I can do this all day."

The annoyed wrinkle around Riddle's eyes is a heady source of vindictive satisfaction. But Riddle doesn't say anything. He isn't going to call her off. He must think Harry's obstinacy has a limit, and Harry will snap and fight back eventually.

Harry *is* fighting back. He refuses to let them win. Not that there's much chance of that. At this point, Harry doesn't think he could lose his temper if he tried– ruining their plans is far more rewarding than nailing Bellatrix with a few hexes.

Bellatrix can't win this. She can't get what she wants out of him. It's difficult not to show how powerful that makes him feel. Harry has to remind himself to drag his feet back to his starting position.

Harry bows and immediately fires a flurry of disarming spells, as if to catch her off guard. Expelliarmus is a long incantation – it'd never work.

Bellatrix makes a noise of disgust and retaliates with a chain of hexes. Her defence is getting sloppy, but, to be fair, it doesn't need to be good in this farce, and her attack more than makes up for it. Still, her volatility might be exploitable in the arena. Harry makes a mental note and stamps 'use with caution' all over it.

She's herding him into a corner. Harry trips in the other direction. Will she never tire? Fine. He really could do this all day since spite seems to have invigorating properties. For a minute, he's tempted to drag it out. He wants to steer this train wreck until Bellatrix self-destructs from pure frustration. But that's a dangerous impulse. He shouldn't. It's risky. Bellatrix is a better dueller than he is. Eventually, she's going to catch him with something he doesn't want to be hit with, or push him into revealing too much.

He realises, with a jolt, that he lost sight of his goal. He was going to let Bellatrix vent so she wouldn't target Hermione, but that plan was doomed after the first round. Now, he's just making her angrier.

There is no good reason to continue. He needs to stop. But since Riddle won't cooperate, Harry doesn't have many options. He might need to get a serious injury so the trainers send him off to Pomfrey, or provoke a dark curse so they kick her out.

"You're a disgrace to the school. But what could you expect? Son of a mudblood and a blood traitor, you never stood a chance against me, centuries of magic to my name. You are fated to die alone and insignificant, the last of your line."

"Bella," Harry tsks. "Is that any way to talk to your family heir?"

She freezes.

Thank you, Uncle Sirius, for your dedication to pissing off your folks. It's a true inspiration.

"You got that memo, right? I guess the news might be kinda slow since you're only on the side branch of the family tree." He knows they did. Sirius announced it in the Daily Prophet. Which, incidentally, Bellatrix and Malfoy have had it out for Harry since third year. And who else would sic aurors on Sirius with trumped-up charges? But they can't depose Sirius as the head of House Black until they catch him, so Harry has the benefit it still being completely correct.

"Crucio!"

Harry ducks. That escalated quickly. Red alarms flash, but the demand to stop, predictably, does little more than add to the atmosphere.

"That's not very sporting. Where are your manners?"

The trainers intercept a nasty paralysis curse heading his way.

"Heathen!" Aaand that's an explosive curse – a classic. "A halfblood will never be the head of House Black!" He doesn't know what that spell is, but he'd put long odds on a tickling charm. The trainers struggle to subdue her, so she lashes out at them too. "When I finish with you, I'll tear your godfather apart piece by piece!"

The Blacks are in for a surprise if that happens. As things stand, the fortune goes to a werewolf, Bellatrix's least favourite sister, various Weasleys and orphanages. The Lordship goes to Dobby. The only problem with the plan is Harry and Sirius wouldn't be around to see their faces.

Harry snickers and barely dodges a trifecta of painful curses. Shit shit shit. She gets faster when she's angry. This would be easier if his stronger shield charms weren't on his Strictly No Casting list. Any fucking time now, trainers.

Four trainers encircle her. Two plant themselves between her and Harry, which very effectively draws her ire and fire, the others attack her back.

Bellatrix's protego can take four strong stunners. Her Oppilo shield is smaller than Riddle's, covering her torso, but she can sustain and move it precisely enough to have a fairly impenetrable defence from the front. A rapid combination of spells from behind knocks her out.

Harry wants a quill to write all that down.

Disarmed, petrified and with her shit conclusively lost, Bellatrix is put in time out.

A brave trainer jams Bellatrix's wand back in her holster. Good call. She's straining against the spells, eyes locked on Harry.

"All champions out," Harry's trainer calls, heading for the door. Also a good call.

"Wands away." Harry is much less enthusiastic about that order. Dodging alone won't let him hold out long against Bellatrix if she takes a trainer's wand, or if her friends take offence.

Harry doesn't leave until Riddle, Stoeva and Mazet are disarmed, or as disarmed as Riddle ever gets. Stoeva and Mazet hover by the door. They shoot Harry nasty looks but anything they planned is quelled by a warning from the trainer – the warning carries weight when he's armed.

"Hospital wing, Potter," the trainer gestures.

Harry is fine. He avoided everything in the last volley, a feat which must look a lot more like luck than skill if the girls' scorn is anything to go by.

He managed better than the trainer, at least. The trainer's wand arm is purple and taught with pain. Whatever that curse is required a self-applied tourniquet spell. Harry feels a stab of guilt. No one was supposed to get hurt.

“You’re staying with me until we get the all-clear,” the trainer explains. He raises a shield at their backs and Harry appreciates the prudence.

Riddle steps up to walk beside Harry. Harry glares at him. He’s aching all over. He wants to be angry because that mess was unnecessary and he’s going to be dealing with a pissed off Bellatrix until one of them dies and he knows who to blame.

But as the fury simmers down to residual annoyance it leaves him drained and exhausted. He can’t cling to it– it would be more exhausting to try. The rage is banked, but it could reignite at a moment’s notice. Riddle doesn’t try his luck.

There’s silence.

Harry is glad for it. He’s on edge and it’s proving difficult to calm down. The world is still lagging. He’s wired from the fight. The danger was more real than he’s used to. Even Snape, ever the sadist, lacks that sharp desire to harm.

Harry takes deep breaths and focuses on the sound of shoes scuffing on stone, anchoring himself. The occlumency is useful for more than just veela.

Riddle eyes him, frowning. After a moment he asks, “Why did you let her do that?”

The urge to snap has passed. Now Harry is just exhausted. He sighs, “Oh, come on, you know why.”

Riddle’s eyes dart pointedly to one of the omnioculars. Right, Harry realises, he can save face, he can let the sponsors know he didn’t choke, that he does have a plan. Or Riddle is using that to convince him to talk.

Harry hasn’t decided what to do by the time they reach the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey orders Harry to a bed to await a check-up. Harry leans against his usual bed while Pomfrey pounces on the trainer, whose arm is now twice its size and streaked with blue and red.

Riddle does not give Harry an easy solution to his dilemma and leave. He crosses his arms and stands practically on Harry’s toes. Harry is shorter to begin with, but with the slouch taking another few inches, he’s going to get a crick in his neck.

“You’re a good dueller. Better than that pathetic show, at least,” Riddle insists.

If that duel didn’t convince Riddle, then there’s nothing Harry can say that will. Riddle is a much better liar and he’ll spot any attempt. Harry will have to make do. It isn’t the end of the world if Riddle only knows that he’s better than hopeless. Harry can still hide the important details – his strengths and weaknesses.

But Harry might as well tell the sponsors what Riddle already knows, “I want Bellatrix to underestimate me.”

“You are more stubborn than I expected,” Riddle tilts his head, and continues needling like Harry is something unusual to pick apart. “She insulted you. Threatened your best friend. You wanted to fight her. How did you resist? She hurt you, and you let her, again and again.”

Pain. Embarrassment. Big deal. Riddle is wrong where it counts – Harry wanted to beat Bellatrix and he did. Riddle is the one he wanted to fight.

“Should’ve duelled me yourself if you wanted something I’d find hard to resist,” he says.

Riddle’s grin turns all shark, “I’m flattered.”

Harry is baffled for a moment before he realises how that sounded. His face flushes a deep, incriminating red.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Not consciously, anyway.

“How did you mean it?”

What is Harry supposed to say – I want to climb you like a mountain? Because *that* would clear things right up.

Harry immediately wants to bleach his brain. The joke yanks his imagination further down the rabbit hole of inuendo, and he’ll be damned if tries to think of anything else, now. He’s tempted to say it anyway, just for the shock it’ll give Riddle. Harry blames the people that raised him.

But Harry got his mother’s sense as well as her sense of humour, so he merely says, “You have an interesting fighting style. I just thought it’d be more fun than facing the same old trainers.”

“Mhmm, you like the thrill of a challenge, if I remember correctly,” Riddle says, in a faux-blasé way, as if he didn’t just cut straight to the heart of the matter by recalling a throwaway comment in a busy Ball word for fucking word.

Talk about a mind like a steel trap.

Riddle leans forward. “Duel me, Harry.” And there’s the gauntlet, thrown at last. “Show me what you can do.”

“That’d be a bit counterproductive,” Harry says. It is precisely what he’s trying to avoid.

“Ah, you don’t want to give your competitors experience fighting against you. Is that what Snape says? No, that can’t be your reason – when have you ever listened to Snape?”

Harry stamps down on the reflex to rebel against anything Snape says. It’s exactly the response Riddle is aiming for. “Nice try.”

“Snape is overreacting. The experience goes both ways. I’ll get better at fighting you, you’ll get better at fighting me. It balances, we end no worse off than when we started, but we’ll both have some fun, maybe impress the sponsors too.”

Harry shakes his head –

“We’ve got the all-clear, Potter. You’re free to leave,” the injured trainer interrupts.

“No, he certainly may not,” Madam Pomfrey says. “On the bed, Mr Potter.”

Harry blinks. “I’m fine. I didn’t get hit by anything a finite couldn’t fix.”

“Except that wrist reversal hex,” Riddle says. Because Riddle is a bastard. Three for three.

Harry glares. Riddle grins.

“Fine, are you? I’ll be the judge of that. Get on the bed.”

Harry jumps up, and that is a *mistake* because now Riddle is standing between his knees, and someone summoned all the air from Harry’s lungs and his ears fill with static and his eyes have a mind of their own.

“Now, let’s see,” Madam Pomfrey says, bustling Riddle out of the way, and Harry can breathe again. She casts a suite of diagnostic charms.

“Hmm,” she observes suspiciously. “You have a very elevated heart rate.”

Riddle lets out an inelegant cough and Harry’s *face* is on *fire*.

All Pomfrey finds is very minor bruising from the knockback jinx, but she scowls at it like it’s a student exceeding visiting hours. It’s a lot of hassle for no reason. Harry has had worse from trying to get Ron out of bed the morning after astronomy.

As soon as she’s finished, Harry drags Riddle out of there before he can say anything else, like ‘concussion’ or ‘precautionary overnight observation’. It’s dinner time and Harry wants a proper meal, not the bland stuff they serve in the hospital wing.

“So, about that duel,” Riddle says casually.

Harry groans. “Why won’t you just let it go?”

“You know why,” Riddle says.

“No. I don’t.”

Riddle stops and stares.

Harry also stops on reflex before he remembers he doesn’t want to deal with Riddle and keeps walking.

Riddle makes an amused sound and catches up easily with his too-long strides. “You don’t have a guess?”

“Loads,” Harry says. And he isn’t convinced by any of them. They range from Riddle’s personality (curiosity, sadism, morals that easily accommodate toying with people) to tournament tactics (evaluating the competition, mind games and intimidation, kicking arse to make himself the only sensible sponsorship choice) to the patently absurd (assessing Harry for an alliance). Some of those might be part right; Harry can imagine Riddle expending some effort on the tactics, but not this *persistence*. Harry is missing something, and that makes him edgy.

“Such as?”

Harry sighs and feels like he’s being set up for one of Snape’s quizzes

that have no correct answers.

“Poaching sponsor attention?” But if that was Riddle’s main goal, it would make more sense to challenge all the top duellers, starting with Ganz. He would’ve defeated Bellatrix in their bout, earlier.

“Hmm, I see why you might think that. There’s a chance trouncing you would take your sponsors. But it could backfire on me. People like an underdog.”

Trouncing! Harry bristles. He hurries to soothe down that reaction before Riddle notices. He’s not quick enough. Riddle was waiting for it.

That smug grin really shouldn’t be so attractive.

“Do you think I’m wrong? Prove it.”

Infuriating. But interesting. Riddle is pushing hard. It’s dawning on Harry that, for whatever reason, this really *matters* to Riddle.

“Are you just screwing with my head?” Harry guesses. It’s plausible because mind games seem to be Riddle’s default setting; he tries something every other sentence. But then, Riddle doesn’t need any specific circumstances, so there’s no need to push for a duel unless he has something extra special planned – which is excellent incentive to avoid it.

“Such convoluted motives you assign me! Perhaps I’m just checking you out.”

Harry blushes and a little voice in the back of his mind starts jumping up and down shrieking in vindication: mind games!

“You’re evaluating the competition?” Harry is sceptical. Riddle can’t be worried that Harry could overpower him. If Harry was that good, Riddle would already know. You can’t get that good without people noticing. Harry would be the talk of the school in the same way Riddle is. If Riddle is concerned, Harry can only attribute it to excess humility, and ascribing *that* to Riddle is so contradictory it makes Harry want to laugh.

“Of course, I’m evaluating my competition,” Riddle eyes Harry up and down in a clear provocation. “Would you like to hear what I’ve discovered?”

That's a trap if Harry's ever seen one. "Sure."

"You taught NEWT level defence in your fifth year. You excel at defence, and you must have excellent knowledge of dark magic, by extension."

Okay, so maybe Harry has been the talk of the school once or twice.

"I know you and your friends didn't stop training when your students left for the night, you went *further*. You have something worth hiding. Anything worth hiding is worth discovering."

"It was hardly a secret. We let everyone in, up to and including *you*. Don't get salty with me because you decided to leave the meetings early."

"And isn't that interesting – that you did not feel threatened by anyone. Almost like you were better than they could hope to be?"

Well, that was why Harry was tutoring them.

"Do you know why you are so much better than your peers? Better than Hermione, with her incredible intelligence and work ethic, will ever be?" Riddle steps closer. "You like fighting."

"I fight to protect people, not because I like hurting them," Harry objects.

Riddle rolls his eyes. They catch the light, flashing gold for a moment. "Spare me your Gryffindor virtuosity. Noble sentiment is certainly not why you want to fight me. You want to push your luck, your limits. You enjoy the struggle. You don't need to win, and that sets you apart from the people who do. People who like to win don't like to fight because there's a chance they could lose. They only engage if they've got the upper hand. They fall apart the moment they perceive they're at a disadvantage. You're used to it. Setbacks don't faze you, can't keep you down. You're scrappy. You're the textbook underdog. It's not about winning. You'll pick any fight if it's a good fight."

Riddle ducks closer and his too-wide grin is all Harry can see.

"A good fight is a challenge. It's one mistimed shield away from the hospital wing. It's your opponent trying everything they've got because they have to take you seriously. It's thinking you're going to lose and then thinking again. It's the frustration, the fear, the excitement, sharpened into aggression. Tell me it doesn't make your

blood sing."

Harry gapes. He can't speak, because he doesn't what to tell Riddle he's right, and those are the only words within his reach. How is Harry supposed to deny that he enjoys fighting when it's defined like *that*? It's patently unfair.

"We are alike, Harry, but for one aspect: I do not deny myself the things I want."

How can Riddle say stuff like that with a straight face? Harry is a few interesting shades of red away from running back to Pomfrey to get an anti-immolation salve.

Fuck, Harry is going to need a wank when he escapes this conversation.

But if Riddle is telling the truth, it explains a lot about why he's so determined to duel Harry. Harry is about to accept that is the best answer he's going to get, except there's a niggling doubt and Harry's never been good at leaving well enough alone.

What Riddle said is true, but it's not the whole story. Riddle's argument is from a place of concern. Harry dismissed that motivation for a reason. Riddle is so talented he won't even consider most of the champions as competition. Ganz and Bellatrix, maybe. Definitely, if they work together, but Ganz is a halfblood so that isn't likely.

It hits Harry like a lightning bolt. "You're afraid of teamwork," he says, and he means it in the tritest way imaginable.

Riddle lurches away. He looks like he's been hit upside the head. Harry doesn't think that it's because Slytherins are allergic to friendship, despite what Ron says.

"You're worried we'll continue to work together. Me, Hermione, Cedric, Roger and Amelia. You're afraid we'll ally with Ganz." Harry grins. "You want to know how well each of us fights individually, to calculate if you can take us on all at once."

Riddle stares.

There are two points of colour on his cheeks. Anger? Embarrassment? Harry can't tell; Riddle's expression is blank.

Riddle turns on his heel and walks away.

Harry laughs and practically skips the rest of the way to dinner. But he does stop in his room for a cold shower, first.

Chapter End Notes

So how was that? Let me know in the comments, cheers.

There might be an itsy bitsy delay on the next chapter.

Day six, seven

Chapter Summary

Oops, consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry slides into the seat beside Hermione at speed.

“You’re in a good mood,” she notes.

“Had a bit of a revelation. Riddle is a terrifying fighter. You and I should be able to hold him off, but if we want to defeat him, we’ll need some extra oomph. We’ll need to practice with Cedric, Roger and Amelia, and we should ally with Ganz. She’s the best dueller.”

“We might not want the best dueller in our midst in the arena.”

Harry pauses. Considers this. “We should check she’s trustworthy first.”

“We could ally with Tom instead,” Hermione says. Right, Harry keeps forgetting they’re friends. “He seems open to the idea.”

“Yeah, with the Blood Supremacists,” Harry wrinkles his nose. And the idea of fighting Riddle backed up by a large group of purebloods sets his hair on end. They will definitely need Ganz on their side to defeat a force like that. “I haven’t seen him hang out with anyone else.”

“Maybe he can’t?” Hermione suggests. “The Blood Supremacists are isolationist, and Bellatrix is a jealous and possessive girl. They don’t accept moderates. If he’s with them, he has to be all in.”

“It’s a little odd, don’t you think, how well they get along,” Harry says. “He has Bellatrix eating out of the palm of his hand.”

“Yes, and the rest of them grudgingly follow her lead.”

“Seems unstable, relying so heavily on one person’s favour.”

…

Harry and Hermione are barely through the door on Saturday evening

when Snape sniffs out some trouble. Snape turns in a rustle of black cloak and stares between them before his gaze settles on Harry. He narrows his eyes down his long, hooked nose. “What did you do?”

Harry scowls. Snape always assumes he’s done something, but this time he’s right and he’s going to be insufferable. “Why do you think I did anything?” It comes out sulkier than Harry intended, and he winces, knowing he’s just as good as admitted guilt.

“Potter!”

“I duelled Bellatrix.”

Harry is braced for yelling. Instead, there’s deadly calm crackling in the air.

“I distinctly recall informing you that duelling the champions is the single stupidest thing you could do.”

“It wasn’t exactly my choice.”

“Do you enjoy doing the precise opposite of what I say?”

“I *tried* to get out of it. She didn’t take no for an answer.”

“Or are you merely incapable of following the simplest of instructions?”

“She said –”

“I don’t care what she said! You couldn’t go one week without one of your petty feuds with a Slytherin. Use your head, Potter, put common sense above your hurt feelings.”

“You’re not listening to me! It wasn’t about proving myself, it was the opposite. I set out to *lose*. Thoroughly.”

Impatient silence. Snape folds his hands into his cloak. “Elaborate.”

“She wouldn’t let me leave without a fight. I cast a handful of basic spells and dodged as well as a lame donkey until she got so angry the trainers restrained her because that was the only way I could get her off my back. I didn’t give anything away.”

Any hope Harry has of Snape understanding he made the best of a bad situation is lost in that scornful look. “Any reaction or lack of reaction reveals some of your cards. And of all the champions, you had to

provoke Miss Black!"

Harry grinds his teeth.

"I see I was overly optimistic in my prediction that you would last a week before scuttling your chances. Miss Black is the Ministry's star champion. Congratulations, you are now the villain for her to vanquish."

"So they'll portray me badly," Harry shrugs. It's not a *good* outcome, he knows, but it's hard to find it personally affronting when his values are the opposite of the Ministry's anyway.

"They'll portray you as a soft-hearted, bumbling buffoon. You can forget about sponsors. You're blacklisted. What a waste of my time."

"Sponsors can't kill me, unlike Bellatrix and Riddle."

"The gamemakers most certainly can," Snape shoots back. "Who sets the challenges, Potter? Who provides the tools you need to survive?"

Snape shakes his head. "I told you not to attend combat classes. If you had not been there, she would not have been able to challenge you."

"I needed to see how Riddle fights! And I saw how the trainers took down Bellatrix!"

Snape pauses. "Go on, then. Expound on the knowledge you gained that must be more valuable than all sponsor gifts."

Harry does, and fortunately he's angry enough that he doesn't wax lyrical about how Riddle moves and thinks.

McGonagall arrives halfway through Harry's analysis and she raises an eyebrow at the lack of occlumency training occurring, but doesn't interrupt. Neither does Snape. Harry would wonder about that, but he hasn't the time. Once he's finished his report, McGonagall puts them through their paces. She tests their oppilo shields and then their elemental conjuration – lightning this time, good grief.

Before Harry and Hermione head to bed, muscles twitching and frizzier than usual, McGonagall informs them that they require a rest day once a week and she doesn't want to see them doing anything strenuous for the next 24 hours.

A break from occlumency sounds like heaven, but everything else?

Wasting time while he still has time to prepare for the arena? He'll be bored and antsy before breakfast – not very restful.

Hermione is initially swayed by McGonagall's peer reviewed references backing up her point about rest being essential to maximise learning speed, but once the professor clarifies that brains require rest too, Hermione digs her heels in.

They argue McGonagall down to half a day and agree not to attend classes on Sunday afternoons. They are still allowed to go to healing in the morning. Harry can go to the gym on the condition that he only does a light workout. Hermione is allowed in the library for recreational reading only. Harry isn't going to be the one to inform McGonagall that Hermione's recreational reading is more likely to be a fifteenth century treatise on spell crafting than a novel.

…

Harry is, perhaps, not doing the lightest of workouts. He ducks a right hook and swings, fist connecting with McLaggen's ribs with a satisfying jolt. McLaggen's breath leaves him in a whoosh, but it barely slows him down. He kicks out and Harry leaps back. McLaggen follows. Harry ducks another punch, grabs the arm on the return and hauls McLaggen off balance, into a raised knee. It would've connected with McLaggen's gut if he wasn't so damn fast.

"Good!" McLaggen says, twisting somehow to hook Harry's ankle and the balance shifts.

Harry tries to disengage, because he knows from experience that close grappling rarely works out for him. He jabs at McLaggen's eyes, takes a hit to his ears that leaves his head spinning, but manages to stay on his feet.

"Break," McLaggen calls.

Harry drops his fists and heads for the water and towels. He is distracted by the other early riser. Krum seems to be settling into a similar routine to Harry. He's shown up every morning for the last few days. They mind their own business, but when Harry has a moment, he's drawn to stare. Any ungainliness Krum appears to have on ground disappears once he's moving. He is an incredible athlete to watch, but then, he is one of the best seekers in the world. At the moment, Krum is finishing up with the weights. He normally does a set of sprints, next. Harry wonders if it is the training routine he uses for his Quidditch career.

“You’re a fast learner,” McLaggen says, wiping the sweat off his face.

Harry hums and refocuses. “I see what you mean about my weight distribution.” He’d actually managed to pull the larger man off balance instead of just yanking his own arms out of their sockets.

“Get that move to work three times in a row and then we’ll try something else,” McLaggen grins.

Harry perks up. After a week of training, he’s figured out they have a sense of fun in common. Anything that has McLaggen this excited must be good. “Weapons?”

“Obstacle course, I reckon,” McLaggen is eying Krum, too. “I think it would do you both good to have some competition.”

“Against Krum?” Harry says, leaning forward. He’s only seen Krum run the course once, when Harry cracked the shits with Snape and turned up early. Krum is good. “Sounds like fun.”

“I’ll organise it,” McLaggen claps Harry on the shoulder. “And we’ll see about weapons tomorrow. You’ve got a feel for the rhythm of a fight, now. We’ll spar again to test how much you remember, then start with quarterstaffs.”

“So I’m going to be the piñata. Yay,” Harry says dryly, but he can’t hide his anticipation and he practically skips back to the mats.

“That’s the spirit!” McLaggen says, and Harry springs at him.

McLaggen doesn’t make it easy. He is slippery as an eel and the third round drags out so long Harry’s muscle start to feel like rubber. But Harry accepts a glancing blow to the shoulder, spins, grabs and pulls, and sends McLaggen stumbling.

“Well done,” McLaggen says. Harry sort of collapses against him. McLaggen huffs a laugh and ruffles his hair.

McLaggen approaches Krum’s trainer while Harry stumbles to a chair and guzzles more water. He unwraps his hands, the last of the tension uncoiling with them. He flexes his fingers and pokes a few tender spots, testing the ache – nothing needs healing.

A short conference, then Krum’s eyes turn to Harry, and Harry sees a matching interest in them. Harry heaves his sorry carcass up and joins them.

“A race. Yes. This is a good idea,” Krum says.

“With or without spells?” Harry asks.

“You are not allowed to duel in this room,” McLaggen reminds them.

Krum considers this. “But spells are allowed on the equipment, da? That would make more problems. That is better. Less predictable.”

Harry agrees entirely, and thinks *what would Fred and George do?*

Harry heads to the start line and grins at Krum beside him. He bounces from foot to foot as the course decides on a configuration. Harry can hear it grinding and clunking, but he can’t see it – the first obstacle is an eight-foot wall, so the rest of the course always has a few surprises.

“Ready?” McLaggen raises his wand, pauses, and fires sparks.

They sprint for the wall. Harry casts spongify at the base of Krum’s side, making the ground too soft to kick off from, and he hurdles a trip-line trap that Krum sets practically on his toes.

Krum finites the trick and leaps, grasping the top of the wall and pull himself up in one motion, Harry quick on his heels.

Harry takes in the whole course in a quick glance, thinking ahead. He casts another softening spell, this one to save his ankles and time as he jumps, tucks and rolls.

The balance beams are a few paces away. Harry decides that Krum’s could use an oil slick, and he doesn’t hang around to enjoy the spectacle, hitting his own beam at a run, arms spread for balance. But halfway across, Harry’s beam rotates beneath his feet, and he squawks in surprise. He leaps as far as he can – he makes it to the end, just – landing on his stomach, legs dangling over the pit.

Harry hears the pounding of feet. Krum is about to overtake him, and while he’s down, he casts a quicksand trap. Krum steps off the beam, straight into the trap.

Harry gets to his feet while Krum frees himself, and they’re both off.

The next obstacle is a test of timing. Harry jumps onto the first pillar, waits for a gap in the swinging barriers and jumps to the next pillar. As soon as he lands, he ducks under a plank that swings out. He

straightens quickly; if he hesitates too long, the pillar will buck him off. Harry makes it through the next barrier ahead of Krum, and he reaches across and disillusions the pillar Krum is aiming for.

Krum swears and Harry laughs.

Krum jumps and sticks the landing, proving he's got both guts and a good memory. He'll need both for the next obstacle. There's an assortment of platforms. The red ones move left or right, the blue ones move forward or backwards, the green ones up or down. Across the room there are three small, colour coded targets – switches. Only the red one is shining, so the platforms are currently set to left, backwards and down.

It's a three-dimensional maze and one wrong step can put you in a dead end or send you back to the start. Harry analyses it on the fly, tracing the branching possibilities backwards from the last platform. The possible solutions overlap – Harry will have to be careful with traps or he'll catch himself. By the time he reaches the first platform, he's memorised his route. Which does not help him when his platform –which is a dull grey and supposed to be stationary– is levitated toward the ceiling.

"Avis oppugno!" Harry conjures a flock of finches to distract Krum.

His platform jars to a stop. Thankfully, the enchantments reassert themselves and the platform hovers in its new position instead of falling.

There's a blue platform behind him that he'll be able to reach if it's a bit closer. Harry jinxes the blue target. The platform approaches and Harry drops onto it, but his next platform, a green one, moves away – Krum has flipped the switch. Harry sends a jinx to turn it back, and then, because Harry doesn't need the blue target for a while, but Krum will, Harry casts, "Protego totalum!"

A shield shimmers into place around the blue target. Harry gets a few steps further while Krum batters away at the shield.

Harry's awareness strains to keep track of the platform movements, the changing routes, Krum's position, and the boobytraps he and Krum are setting to make platforms incorporeal or icy or sticky. Harry's cheeks hurt from grinning.

It takes a long time for them to get through the obstacle, since they're just as focused on sending each other backwards as making progress.

It's impossible to say who's winning. They swap the lead a dozen times through the platforms, then during the cliff climb, the rope swing, and the rest of the course. When one of them gets ahead, they're immediately disadvantaged because they can't see what the other is casting, and it's only a matter of time before they'll be tripped up. Neither can get far enough ahead to get out of spell range.

It's a roll of the dice who will win. Krum runs a defensive game on the last stretch, he dodges everything Harry conjures and crosses the finish line. Harry follows a second later.

Krum bows over, panting. "Bozhe moĭ."

Harry flops onto his back, sucking in air. "That– was– bloody– brilliant!"

McLaggen drops a towel on Harry's head.

"Ta," Harry says, muffled by fabric. He's tempted to leave it there until he suffocates. His arms don't feel entirely connected to his body. God, is it only 9am? He wants to go back to bed but at the same time, he wants to put it off as long as possible because he is going to be so sore tomorrow.

"Good race, Potter," Krum says.

Harry sits up, wipes sweat out of his eyes, and sees respect. "Yeah. You too. Congrats on the win."

Krum offers him a hand up. "You have good balance and awareness. You play sport. Quidditch?"

It is not really a question. Krum would know.

Harry nods. "I miss it. Shame the Ministry cleared out the broom shed."

Luckily, there are still brooms in the Room of Requirement. The punching bags are calming, but they're not *relaxing*. He can't spend two months wound up. It's one thing to take all their belongings, but it just seems petty to take the chess sets, gobstones, card decks and brooms too. Or, maybe not petty – the Ministry have made it abundantly clear that they want them training whenever they're not sleeping. Even chatting over meals has a purpose; making alliances. There's no time for boredom. No time for play. And nothing to play with – no bonding activities.

Hhm.

Flying alone is more relaxing. Harry decides to invite Cedric and Roger for a fly on the weekend.

“Come on,” McLaggen says. “Let’s debrief. Tell me five tactical mistakes you made.”

…

Rest day means that, by lunchtime, Harry and Hermione have run out of things they are allowed to do. It is a perfect opportunity to hide in the Room of Requirement and crosscheck their progress with wandless magic. Wandless magic isn’t covered in any classes, so they won’t be breaking McGonagall’s order. They’re even keeping to the spirit of the rule, since finding loopholes is another of Hermione’s hobbies.

A few whispers about their progress throughout the week can’t compare to a thorough discussion. Harry knows Hermione has managed summoning and banishing by now, and he thinks her insights will help him – his summoning spell is working fine but he is struggling with banishing and he’s not sure why. He’s also aware she figured out a spell to unlock their holsters and Harry needs to learn it, just in case. For his part, he’s making quicker progress with protego, and he wants to catch her up. Also, to throw things. You need to stress test a shield to get it working properly.

But before they can finish eating their lunch, Umbridge approaches with Bellatrix and a full guard of aurors. They march down the Hall and stop in front of Harry.

“Mr Potter. Come with me,” Umbridge says.

“I told you so!” Trelawny says. “I predicted you’d suffer for facing your foe in the ring!”

Harry doesn’t appreciate how pleased she sounds.

“Young ladies should not interrupt a conversation unless spoken to,” Umbridge says and Trelawny shrinks back from her glare.

Harry stands and follows reluctantly. The aurors form up around them, forcing him closer to Bellatrix, which, considering what this must be about, seems awfully short-sighted.

Whisper shouting starts up behind him.

“Harry isn’t going to get in trouble,” Hermione says.

“He did. He went to the hospital wing. And he will. My powers will see all in these Games,” Trelawny says.

“Your so-called prediction was *days* ago. Harry has been in dozens of rings since then,” Roger says.

“And it is a safe bet to assume Harry would get in trouble eventually,” Hermione adds.

Harry wants to object, but, well.

In any case, he’s not going to take his eyes off Bellatrix. She looks ready to strangle him with her bare hands.

They’re marched to an office with ‘High Inquisitor’ engraved on a gold plaque in florid script. Several omnioculars follow them inside, set to capture every angle and close ups. Umbridge is making this a big production, a show of– something. Force? Authority? But against their darling champion? Harry rather expected Bellatrix’s actions to get brushed under the rug. His suspicion rouses further.

The room Umbridge has contaminated is luridly pink and covered in pictures of cats. It does not fit in Hogwarts.

The aurors close the doors and lurk ominously. The window is open. Harry can escape if he needs to but he doesn’t think it’s that kind of threat.

Umbridge sits behind a desk and shuffles a few papers, keeping them in suspense. This is all for show. Harry doesn’t roll his eyes because everyone will see this. If the Ministry are going to make him look as stupid and unhinged as they can manage, he won’t make it too easy for them.

Even though he *really* wants to tell Umbridge that the enormous desk does less to make her look intimidating than ridiculous.

“A very serious matter was brought to my attention,” she says. Pause for effect.

Harry sways out the way of the stomp Bellatrix aims at his foot, missing it as if by accident. He watches the metaphorical steam rise off her out of the corner of his eye.

“Stop fidgeting, Mr Potter. This is a very serious matter.”

Harry doesn’t react, though Umbridge pauses again, giving him plenty of time to do so. He wishes she’d get on with it.

Umbridge looks between them. “You are here because you were very naughty. You cast several restricted spells in a duel. Such a transgression needs to be punished. Now, we at the Ministry are fair and believe in second chances. Miss Black, what do you have to say in your defence?”

“I was provoked,” Bellatrix says.

Umbridge nods sympathetically. “This was an isolated event. You have been a model and decorous champion. Miss Black, I am assigning an auror to follow you about the castle to prevent further incidents.”

Personal trainer, Harry mentally translates the token show of a punishment.

“Mr Potter, you are on probation,” Umbridge declares.

Harry raises an eyebrow. What, so he’s got a warning?

She elaborates gleefully, “You are no longer allowed to raise your wand against a fellow champion. You will duel against trainers or mentors or not at all.”

Harry wrestles with a spike of annoyance. It’s the principle: it’s unfair for him to be penalised at all when he didn’t break any of the rules. But he doesn’t really care –he didn’t intend to duel any champions in the first place– until he realises it could interfere with his practice with Hermione. He won’t be able to run the obstacle course against Krum again, and that was *fun*.

Umbridge waits him out, not inviting him to defend himself, but expecting him to try, to speak out of turn, all indignant and righteous. Umbridge is taunting him as clearly as Bellatrix did. He’ll beat her the same way, by refusing to give her what she wants.

“If I may?” Harry asks, and Umbridge jumps on the chance for him to stick his foot in his mouth. He relaxes his shoulders. “What am I being punished for?”

“You were involved in an illegal duel,” Umbridge explains as if to a particularly daft child.

“It was legal from my side of it. I cast shielding, disarming and stunning spells. All permitted to cast against champions in practice duels,” he says. Calm. Rational.

“That is beside the point, Mr Potter.”

And it’s his turn to level an expectant silence.

“I have interviewed the trainers. Miss Black first engaged in a civil duel with Mr Riddle. There was no problem until you got involved.”

Harry is sure the trainer Bellatrix put in the hospital wing gave a glowing review, no doubt as sanguine as the woman she tried to decapitate.

“You were the first to step onto the court, Mr Potter. You are the instigator.”

Harry wants to slap his past self for deciding to taunt Bellatrix instead of going with the hospital wing exit plan, though he doubts Bellatrix would receive much more censure for injuring him.

“I was provoked,” Harry says, because if he’s not going to get out of this, he might as well highlight their hypocrisy. “Bella issued the challenge. Incessantly. If I stepped into the court first it was because I happened to be closer.”

“A baseless claim,” Umbridge dismisses.

“Perhaps we should review the omniocular footage to clear it up,” he says, only a touch sardonically. Really, the scorn was barely noticeable.

“Do not interrupt me,” Umbridge abruptly raises her voice. She pauses for a breath. She starts again, voice sickly sweet. “I will maintain order in this castle. I will not have you provoke any other champions. My decision is final.”

“Of course,” Harry inclines his head. Let the Ministry try to get useful soundbites out of that.

They are dismissed shortly after, and Bellatrix’s new auror doesn’t do anything to stop her practically pouncing on Harry the moment they’re outside.

“Aw, baby Potter can’t duel anymore,” Bellatrix coos. “Did you ask her

to do that? Is it because you're scared?"

"What." Riddle says.

"Tom!" Bellatrix beams and skips up to him. "It's the funniest thing–"

Riddle ignores her. "Umbridge banned you from duelling champions?"

He sounds *pissed*.

"Oh, I'm sorry that your plan backfired on you. Must be a terrible inconvenience," Harry says archly.

"Itsy bitsy bitey Potter–"

"Bella." Riddle glares her to silence. "Leave us."

"Oh, don't be like that Tom," she pouts. "I didn't tell her to do it."

Riddle's glare doesn't let up until she flounces off.

Riddle pinches the bridge of his nose. "How about a deal – duel me if I get you cleared."

Harry considers it. He can let Riddle beat him up. He can probably resist the temptation to fight him in earnest. But he *can* learn from his mistakes. "Hermione will referee. Three rounds, first to disarm."

"Five rounds."

"Four."

"And if it's a draw?"

"It won't be," Harry says.

Riddle looks amused. "Fine." He knocks on Umbridge's door. Harry leans against the wall. This should be good.

"Madam Umbridge," Riddle greets, charm dialled up to eleven, and strikes up a casual conversation.

Harry watches and learns. Riddle plays characters. He starts with the Peer. He talks about their common acquaintances, making it clear that he matters to the right people. When that doesn't produce results, he turns into the Sycophant; obsequious in an obvious way that invites Umbridge to try to take advantage of his connections and power. He

appeals to reason, then to emotion, then to ambition.

“Was it true you were a Slytherin?” Riddle asks. Establishing rapport by appealing to common ground?

“Yes,” Umbridge says, and Harry can see it in the cutting way she smiles. “It is *such* a shame Slytherin only has one real champion this year.”

The temperature plummets and Harry’s hair stands on end. Even the omnioculars waver. Harry’s hand itches to draw his wand, and he’s not even the focus of that anger. He waits with bated breath, because surely this is the moment Umbridge recognises the power, the mistake, and shits herself.

Umbridge adjusts her cardigan as if it was just a normal breeze. Judging by her smug look, she’s congratulating herself for her wit.

Riddle’s smile grows a lot more honest, and Harry suspects his goal has just changed from ‘charm’ into something he finds more palatable.

Harry realises he is watching the exact moment someone outlives their usefulness. It is fascinating.

“Of course, in your esteemed wisdom, you would recognise Miss Black as the most exemplary candidate,” Riddle says, the veneer of the Sycophant just enough to get away with the sarcasm.

He doesn’t bother tying up the conversation. He walks away. Umbridge, thinking she’s had the last word, lets Riddle go to apparently lick his wounds.

Harry falls in step with him. “So some people are immune to your charms.”

“Two types of people, at opposite ends of the intelligence bell curve,” Riddle says.

No need to guess to which end Umbridge fancies herself. “She thinks very highly of herself.”

Riddle’s lip curls. “Undeservedly. It is like talking to a houseplant.”

“Is it still the Dunning-Kruger effect if it applies to self-reflection?” Harry wonders.

Harry realises he skipped one or two essential communication steps,

and he's about to walk the statement back so it doesn't come so out of the blue, but Riddle makes the leap right along with him. "As opposed to narcissism?"

"Or in combination with it. Split self-reflection into two issues and it's a bit clearer – perception of self and perception of other people."

"Hmm. Her ability to perceive others does fit the Dunning-Kruger model. She's demonstrably not as good at recognising power as she thinks she is," Riddle says.

"And she's not as smart as she thinks she is. So if we're looking at the skill of self-reflection, then it's also Dunning-Kruger, but the effect manifests as an overinflated ego – narcissism."

"Ah, you are arguing that cause and effect is a matter of perspective in this instance. It has merit. But the premise may be flawed since perception of self and perception of other people are not independent. Umbridge judges another's power and intelligence in relative terms – more or less than her own. And she includes the power of her allies in her estimate of her own power. That is part of the reason it is so overinflated; she believes she has the might of the Ministry behind her."

"Okay, don't think I missed what you did there," Harry says, because Riddle started with one argument and ended on a different one, hoping Harry will agree to the second and cede the first by default. "What are you, a lawyer?"

Riddle grins, a light in his eyes. He gestures graciously for Harry to go on.

"*Firstly*, while you're right about perception of self and others being linked, I only separated them to make the question easier to analyse. Whether they're independent or not is irrelevant to my argument. My argument is that narcissism is a result of the Dunning-Kruger effect turned inwards. I'm perfectly happy to be wrong about that, but I'll only admit it if you pose a compelling rebuttal to *that* question, not an easier question that you've substituted."

Riddle bursts into laughter, but Harry is on a roll now.

"Speaking of easier questions – of course, I agree Umbridge considers the Ministry's power as part of her own – she wields her authority like a bloody hammer. I'm less convinced by your psychanalysis, mainly because how could you *possibly* know all that? Frankly, I'm disturbed

by how well you think you understand that woman. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, but even if you're right, your explanation may still be incomplete. Think about it. Umbridge is a relatively big fish in the Ministry, and now that she's away from their shadow she's the biggest fish around."

Riddle's chuckles die off, but the grin remains. "Harry, you are a delight."

Harry can't detect any ridicule, and that makes him suspicious.

"Well, you've called me out," Riddle says. "Full disclosure. I don't have an argument for your Dunning-Kruger-narcissism theory. I will not do you the disservice of half-arsing one now. I will get back to you once I have thought it over. To be clear – you mean narcissism in the colloquial sense."

"Yeah."

Riddle nods. "Umbridge does not fit the profile for narcissistic personality disorder."

"Still an egotistical bitch, though."

"Perhaps we should use that terminology going forward, for clarity?" Riddle says innocently.

"Accuracy is important," Harry agrees.

They share a grin.

"I will not disclose the source of my insight into her thought patterns, but I will say that I have full confidence in my conclusions," Riddle continues. "As for whether Umbridge is *actually* a big fish – yes, for now. She has full rein over the castle. The only person who could change her course is Grindelwald. Certainly, Dumbledore could best her in a duel, and probably all the aurors stationed here, too. But all the aurors in the country? While the Ministry holds his students hostage in France? Dumbledore will not fight Umbridge, because victory over her serves no purpose, and he would lose the ensuing war. Umbridge holds more power than Dumbledore. She is probably the biggest fish in this castle. But."

Ah, there it is, Harry thinks.

"The only power Umbridge holds, the Ministry bestowed upon her.

She is unremarkable intellectually, magically and charismatically. Thus, lacking any means of generating her own power, she depends entirely on Grindelwald. That is her main value to him – her loyalty. He knows she will be loyal because she cannot afford to be otherwise. She is not irreplaceable." Riddle spins to face Harry, walking backwards, he spreads his arms to span the lake behind him, Harry is startled to notice, because when did they even leave the castle? "So, while you are correct in saying Umbridge is a big fish, it encapsulates more to say she has the backing of the bigger fish. To reiterate my point: Umbridge is an egotistical bitch because she believes she has the might of the Ministry behind her."

Harry's mind is prioritising the urge to mess up Riddle's perfectly coifed hair just to see how much more dramatic Riddle will get, so he doesn't have an immediate rebuttal.

But inspiration strikes and Harry stalks forward. "Yes, her power comes from Ministry support – that is true regardless of whether Umbridge is working in her department or in Hogwarts. So your theory cannot explain the difference in her behaviour. And her behaviour *must* be different. She would not get away with carrying a tape measure to check skirt lengths of her colleagues. Because she's not the biggest fish at the Ministry. She can do it here because she is the highest authority."

"Also, because the Ministry dress code is not that strict."

"The dress code is stricter here than the Ministry because Umbridge sets the rules," Harry says. Riddle doesn't back down and Harry ends up closer than he'd planned, so he notices that Riddle is watching his mouth form the arguments. Harry takes a mental note of that– he has a feeling he'll want to examine it more closely when he's not so absorbed in this thoroughly pointless debate. Right now, Harry's mind is on the game. Riddle went for humour instead of a serious response. A feint? Harry needs Riddle to show more cards. He doubles down. "Your theory is digging into the root cause, but losing important details. There is something about being the one left in charge here. The position has gone to her head."

"You are heavily relying on an assumption of differing behaviour, though you have no way to know how she acted inside the Ministry. I'll allow it. But your theory is far from the only possible explanation. In fact…"

They continue walking. The point is snatched from Harry's fingertips

and he is thrilled. At some point the sun dips below the horizon and they head inside for dinner.

“Is it even correct to say Umbridge has power? Since it is entirely conditional on her following the Ministry’s tune, I could argue she is a proxy, a tool for executing Grindelwald’s will,” Riddle argues.

“From lawyer to philosopher. You’ve got layers and layers of prig, Riddle. Fine, Umbridge thinks she’s untouchable, but surely her position isn’t actually fragile. As long as she has the Minister’s favour–”

“Precisely. Favour is a fickle thing.”

They are not interrupted. Harry waves his friends off. Riddle freezes Bellatrix in her tracks with a look. Umbridge glares at them from the head table but she’s too far away to hear or interfere. Harry gesticulates with his fork. Riddle times his more outrageous statements for the moments Harry is drinking pumpkin juice.

By the time they climb through the portrait hole, Riddle has postulated that Umbridge is functionally indistinguishable from a flobberworm. It is well within Harry’s abilities to refute that, but he can’t muster the will, so Riddle wins by default. Harry thinks that’s a dirty trick.

After all that talk, they have a thorough grasp on the whys and hows, but the only information they actually needed, they’d agreed on in the first five seconds. Harry finds that pretty funny, honestly. He lips twitch and he says grandly, “So, in summary, Umbridge is a dead end.”

“Oh, that. I’ll just get someone else to rescind the duelling ban. Barty Crouch, probably.” Riddle lounges in the armchair like it’s a throne.

“Your mentor or the gamemaker?”

“Both. My mentor is more than capable of using his father, in addition to his own contacts.”

“You’re going to a lot of effort.”

Riddle’s teeth glint in the firelight. “I simply *must* see how you duel, now. If this is how well you fare with words…”

“Those expectations are setting you up to be disappointed,” Harry

says.

“I very much doubt it,” Riddle murmurs. “If disappointment is your aim, you’ve yet to manage it.”

A warm glow spreads from the centre of Harry’s chest. He keeps a wary eye on it, because that is *not* helpful.

But Harry is curious, because Riddle must know. “You realise I’m going to duel you just as badly as I did against Bellatrix.”

Riddle laughs. His confidence sends chills down Harry’s spine.

“I can see how much you want it, Harry. When we face off, you won’t be able to help yourself.”

“I wouldn’t count on it, Riddle.” But, with niggling wariness, Harry notes that he doesn’t know how to end a duel against Riddle. He wouldn’t be as easily goaded as Bellatrix. He can see Riddle persisting until he gets what he wants.

“Train hard, Harry. When we meet in the arena it will be *glorious*.”

Harry jolts. Right. Lest he forget this is all part of a murder tournament. He’ll be fighting for his life. No safety nets. He’ll have to give it his all. There’ll be no room for mistakes or doubt. Just talking to Riddle is one of the greatest challenges he’s faced. To honestly fight him…

No, Harry can’t seek it out for the thrill. He’ll prepare for it, like he’ll prepare for other worst-case scenarios.

He needs distance, now. He looks at the clock. It’s not too late for an excuse.

“Speaking of training,” Harry says. “I’ve gotta go or Snape will eviscerate me.”

Riddle inclines his head, looking amused. “Before you do, humour me? Where did you learn to debate?”

“My mum. Merlin, you should’ve met her. She could convince dad the sky was green and the grass was blue.” Lily had a distinct argument style and Harry’s seen hints of it from Snape, and just, no. He is not thinking about that.

Harry climbs through the portrait hole and then he’s at a loss. His

mentors won’t be waiting. He’s supposed to spend the afternoon resting and recovering. But he’s feeling far too restless to sit still. It goes against several people’s advice and Harry knows he’s going to cop and earful, but he figures that relaxation is a state of mind, and punching things is relaxing. He feels entirely justified in returning to the gym.

Chapter End Notes

> Thanks everyone! The support for the last chapter blew me away. You guys got me to squeeze out a few hours to write some more. I got this chapter out earlier than I'd feared and edit the second week of training. It's a lot shorter than the first week, don't worry, we're not going through the whole two months at this pace. We'll get to the arena before the sun burns out. We have set up out villains now - time for them to start driving the plot.

Week 2 day 1

Chapter Summary

> Lest we forget they're training for murder, it's time to learn the Unforgiveables

Harry wakes on Monday feeling like he's never lived through a week that felt so long or so short. And he has to do it seven more times. He takes a moment to just breathe. There's a lot to do, but a routine makes it manageable, somehow. There is occlumency and duelling practice before breakfast, then after, he'll go to the gym to hit things, which is necessarily catharsis after dealing with Snape first thing in the morning. Hermione goes to the library for the same reason. When Harry's body is thoroughly worn out, he'' go to the healing station for a couple hours until lunch. He's got six hours to fill before dinner, that's time to get stuck into two or three training stations as determined by Hermione's schedule. After dinner is more quality time with their mentors. Then there is a little time to look up anything in the library he'll need for the next day, and drag Hermione out of the library to make sure she sleeps. She's trying to read too much.

The crash course on the practical aspects of magic suits Harry's learning style much better than hers. Hermione needs to understand the theory, but there's simply too much to cover. She'd need a time turner to have enough hours in the day. Hermione is never content to learn just enough to scrape by. Which, actually, is probably why she's making much faster progress with warding and enchanting. Runes was never his best subject.

Harry and Hermione are a good pair. Hermione's strengths cover Harry's weaknesses, and vice versa, but there are limits. Just because she's willing to carry deadweight doesn't mean she should have to. Pursuing expertise in your strengths has value, but basic competence in your weaknesses does too.

Harry reluctantly decides to read up on warding and curse-breaking tonight. Wards are stronger when more wands are applied to the problem. But he should also drag Hermione to the gym a few times a week to work on basic fitness. Who knows what they'll have to outrun in the arena. It wouldn't do to collapse a mile in.

Harry stumbles out of bed and tries to wandlessly summon his clothes. His pants get halfway across the room on the first try. Harry hops into

loose workout clothes with a shiver. Knowing that he's going to be very warm soon is no consolation for freezing his tits off now.

Harry has just reached the first-floor landing, when he hears it.

"Do I spy a lost little pufflet?" Bellatrix's voice. And her nickname for Amelia. Harry's blood runs cold.

"So near the dungeons," Bellatrix carries on. "They used to torture students down here, you know. Some of the rooms still have manacles. Bit rusty, but it adds to their charm." Harry takes the stairs two at a time, heedless of the portraits scolding him. "Would you get strung up by wrists or ankles? Shall we find out?"

"Leave us alone," Amelia says calmly.

Us. Please, let her be with Cedric. Please not Görder. The little halfblood won't stand a chance. Harry skids around the ground floor and heads down again. Merlin, Amelia is too brave, wandering around the Durmstrang side of the castle alone. Durmstrang have more Blood Supremacists than the other schools, including Bellatrix's new best friend, and like attracts like.

Bellatrix barks her shrill, cackling laugh. "How long do you think it will take for someone to find you? So many spare rooms, down here. Some haven't been used in *centuries*."

"Black," a new voice cuts in. It's Krum. Harry almost trips, rounding the last corner. "What do you want?"

Krum steps between Bellatrix and the two younger girls, arms folded over his broad chest. Bellatrix is blocking the way back to the surface. Her auror escort is nowhere to be seen. What a surprise.

"Aw, don't be like that," Bellatrix coos, but with a note of steel. She does not tolerate people standing up to her.

Krum notices. He just doesn't care. "Stoeva is leaving the common room soon. I am sure you know the way."

Which is the moment Bellatrix notices Harry. She turns and scowls.

"Morning," Harry smiles brightly with a few too many teeth. Her wand is locked away. Harry might not be a big guy, but he's bigger than Bellatrix and he can throw a punch, if it comes to it. He's just got to make sure it doesn't come to it.

“If it isn’t saviour Potter,” she hisses at him. “He would know all about being strung up in the dungeons by his ankles.”

Harry bites back the sharp retort on his tongue. He was lucky Ron had the Marauder’s map that day. He must pass within arm’s reach to get to the young girls, which sets all his hair on end and his muscles clench.

Krum flexes subtly, but it’s enough movement, enough threat for Bellatrix’s attention to snap to him. “Were you not leaving?”

Harry jumps on the opportunity to bustle Amelia and Görder out from Krum’s shadow and into his own. He has to pass closer to Bellatrix to keep himself between her and them.

Her arm strikes like a snake, talons digging into his sleeve and the flesh beneath. Harry tamps down on his instinct and does not rip it off. He gestures Amelia on, and when that doesn’t work, gives her a push. Amelia and Görder run. It eases Harry’s worry about collateral damage.

Bellatrix leans in. “Always rushing to the rescue. Fancy yourself a hero? Well, you won’t be. You are all going to die. Save them as many times as you like, I’ll kill them all, one by one. I’ll relish it.”

“Enough, Black,” Krum says.

“A bit much for you to stomach?” she pouts at him. “It isn’t a cuddling competition.”

“I know what the competition is. Death is necessary. There is no need to be cruel,” Krum says. He pointedly eyes her death grip on Harry’s arm.

She digs in. Harry doesn’t flinch, despite feeling the slow drip of viscous liquid. His grin gains a few more teeth. “Better wash that off. You wouldn’t want to get dirty.”

Bellatrix draws back with a disgusted sneer. There is blood under her nails. She raises her hand to watch it sparkle in the torch light. “Pretty.”

And then she skips away.

Harry and Krum remain on guard until the steps fade. Ivankova appears out of the shadows to tuck in beside Krum. Harry hadn’t even

noticed her lurking.

“There is something wrong with that one,” Krum says to the dark corridor.

“No kidding,” Harry shakes his head. He turns toward the Great Hall. On second thought –he rolls up his sleeve– maybe the hospital wing. Can’t hurt to have it on record. And who knows where she’s been. Harry pokes the wound, muttering, “Does she spell them sharp or something?”

Krum raises his eyebrows. Ivankova leans in for a look. So do the omnioculars. Harry bats the latter away.

Krum is a pureblood, so Bellatrix won’t dislike him on principle, which is rather telling. Harry feels much more charitably of Krum than he did ten minutes ago. “Watch out for her, yeah? She might try to get back at you for that.”

“Tch. She can try. It will be better for her to focus on someone her own size.”

Harry smiles. “Do you have a younger sister?”

“I have no siblings. Why?”

Harry is a little surprised at the answer. “Just reminded me of someone. Well, if you need backup, you’re welcome to hang out with us.”

“Harry!” Amelia is waiting just around the corner. She looks him up and down the way his mother used to.

“We’re fine,” Harry says. “Are you both okay?”

Görder nods shyly.

“Good,” Harry drops his arm over Amelia’s shoulders and gives her a little shake. “The hell are you doing down here?”

“I heard her picking on Lizzy,” Amelia says.

“I swear I wasn’t as much trouble at your age.”

Amelia raises an eyebrow “Didn’t you fight off, like, a hundred dementors and a werewolf with your fugitive godfather?”

“Is *that* what rumour went around?” Harry laughs incredulously. Internally, flailing. The gossip is usually not so disturbingly accurate. Amelia wasn’t even a student at the time. And just *how?* There were no witnesses. If the Ministry had an inkling, he would’ve been booked for aiding and abetting.

Harry ignores the three side-eyes and settles Amelia into the seat next to Cedric with a pat on her head, just to make her swat at him, with a cheerful, “Mind this one.”

“Sure,” Cedric agrees and passes the pumpkin juice. He doesn’t question it as Görder squishes in next to Amelia, with Krum and Ivankova on the other side of the table.

Harry chooses the seat furthest from Trelawney. His teacup should be out of her reach. Yesterday he got the full ‘*you will be betrayed by someone you do not trust*’ treatment, which was more unhelpfully vague than usual. Isn’t trust required for betrayal?

Trelawney leans on her elbow and seems to glean something from – Harry doesn’t know, the creases in his shirt, perhaps. “You will not recognise your worst fear.”

“Uhuh,” Harry says. “Pass the milk?”

Krum looks around, and Harry says, “Hermione is in the library. She said it’d only take a minute, so if she’s not emerged in twenty, we’ll go chivvy her along.”

Krum’s lips twitch.

It turns out to be one of the days that chivvying isn’t necessary. Hermione appears not long after Umbridge updates the notice board. She skims the messages and then practically stomps to the table.

“Moody is running a lesson casting the Unforgiveables today at eleven, and Imperius resistance training at the same time tomorrow,” Hermione says.

“Sounds important,” Cedric cocks his head. “You look unhappy. Are you alright?”

“Astute,” Hermione growls. “There are two more commandments from Umbridge. Champions are forbidden from being within six inches of each other. Pairs of champions must always have a chaperone.”

“Did she catch someone in a broom closet?” Roger wonders, looking around the Hall for likely culprits.

Cedric snorts, “Who has time for that?”

Who indeed. By bedtime Harry is lucky if he has enough energy to think about kissing someone. And if he has anyone particular in mind, no one needs to know.

But speaking of. He hopes the decrees aren’t because Umbridge got wind of his debate with Riddle. They reached considerable levels of slander and he does not need her gunning for him any more than she already is.

…

“Right, you’ve each got a spider in front of you,” Moody says. “If you’re here because you’ve read the notice, then you know today I’m teaching you how to cast the Unforgiveables. Return tomorrow for the defensive component.”

“I trust you are all capable of hitting a target at point blank range. However, for those of you worried about spells going astray,” Moody’s magic eye stays on Bellatrix as he walks around the room, going so far as to roll into the back of his head. “Rest assured the cubicles around you are solid glass, not conjured. If your spells hit the glass, it will not go through, it will shatter, and Madam Pomfrey will be picking the pieces out of you the manual way.”

“You are not permitted to cast the Unforgivables before the arena unless you are supervised and in an isolated chamber. If you do not succeed today, you may speak to one of the trainers to set up some extra practice time.” Moody turns back to the front with a great swoosh. “The imperius is as simple incantation and wand movement. It requires only determination to enforce your will over your target. Watch me and try it. *Imperio*!”

Harry is less interested in learning the spell than he is in seeing which champions can cast them. He flicks his wand idly at the spider and mutters the curse. He feels a fission of power, a tether between them. That is disturbingly easy. He ends it quickly and the spider returns to running around its jar.

He looks around. Amelia looks affronted by the magic being performed in her presence. Not many are struggling with it. Bellatrix is snickering as she makes her spider bite itself. Riddle isn’t here, but

that is informative too. Riddle wants to be a sole victor. He'd only miss a lesson on the Unforgivables if he has tried and succeeded already.

"The second is the torture curse," Moody says. "It's a bit finicky. Ain't enough to want revenge or information out of them, you've got to want to cause them debilitating pain. The incantation is *crucio*!"

Bellatrix echoes Moody immediately. She looks around to see if her spider is twitching more than anyone else's. She catches Harry's eye and smirks.

Beside Harry, Gauthier is getting frustrated with his efforts producing no results. He's one of the Blood Supremacists. He's just a kid – only fourteen, and he desperately wants it to work.

It strikes Harry, then, that the Ministry put this on the curriculum with the expectation the champions will *use* it. This is not a defensive lesson. And the champions can use the Unforgiveables because the Ministry set the rules, or lack of rules, declaring no magic too dark.

The Ministry can argue that since the Games are necessary – which, they *aren't*, or all seven continents would do it – the Imperius has useful applications and the killing curse is going to be the champions' staple, since it can pierce all magical shields. They can even argue that if you've got to murder someone, the killing curse is a humane way to do it. Maybe there's some twisted sort of logic there.

But there is no reason to teach the Cruciatus curse, not even bad reasons, since torture isn't a good way to interrogate. A confundus and cheering charm combo would be much more reliable.

Torture is for sadists to get a power kick. For people like Bellatrix, and the people organising the Games, driving the champions to such lengths, patting themselves on the back for raising the stakes to make good sport.

Harry wants to storm out in protest. But it wouldn't stop anyone else from learning these spells – using them against him.

Harry's faith in humanity is marginally restored to see he isn't the only one refusing to touch his wand. Hermione and the Hufflepuffs too, but no surprises there. Roger and Trelawny are treating it like an academic exercise and have no hope of succeeding. Harry expected, from their reputation, to see more Durmstrang students on board, but Krum is scowling and it's really only the Blood Supremacists who are

keen. Now, is there anyone hiding interest?

“Not going to try it, Potter?” Moody asks, walking past.

“With respect, sir,” he says calmly. “Get fucked.”

He expects a reprimand at least, but Moody’s mouth just twitches into a crooked grin. Unsurprised and unbothered, he says, “Fair.”

Harry will try the last curse. He’s not sure he wants to know if he can do it. The Harry of a week ago wouldn’t have been able to. The Ministry want to change him into someone who will, and he doesn’t want to change, but he’ll try the spell because the alternatives are worse. He knows because trainers offer several new ones a day (three at least in Healing and only half of them are side effects of messing up). Harry has been told a dozen times now: the killing curse is quick and clean but it’s very difficult, not everyone can do it. The conversation always goes the same way. Here’s an alternative. Here’s one if you’ve got a weak stomach. Here’s an easy one if you can’t muster the focus or power for a killing curse. This one’s got panache, this one’s a classic – it was developed in Roman colosseums, you know.

“The last curse needs no introduction, I’m sure,” Moody says. “Unlike the Cruciatus, the killing curse does not require a specific emotion – not hate or revenge or whatever else you’ve heard, though it helps. The spell is entirely goal-oriented. The focus is the outcome. You may want them hurt. You may want to put them out of their misery. You may want to hit them before they hit you. But that alone is not enough – you must want them *dead*. Gone. Permanently. You must be certain.”

Moody pauses grimly, while his eye does not. It whizzes around to judder to a stop on the door and Harry traces his gaze. Riddle is there, leaning on the doorjamb. After a moment, it is clear Riddle doesn’t mean to enter, and Moody carries on.

“Now, it’s a bit easier to cast on spider than your classmates. Most of us squish spiders without a second thought.” Moody moves away but Harry keeps his eyes on Riddle. Riddle stares right back, inscrutable. “You may not be able to imagine looking at the people beside you and wanting them dead right now, but the classroom is a very different place to the arena. If I’ve learnt anything on this job… when it comes down to the wire, this spell will not be beyond any of you.” Moody passes between Harry and Riddle but it does little to interrupt their

staring. “Best keep that in mind about each other.”

Not even the demonstration can get Harry to look away. He knows the theory. Snape is training him to react at the first hint of the distinctive lightning-shaped wand movement.

“You will attempt it one at a time so we can keep an eye on you. If you try it out of turn, you will be removed from the lesson. Here, half speed. Now, mind your aim. *Avada kedavra*!”

A disproportionately bright and loud flash of green light makes spots dance in the corner of Harry’s eyes.

“Stoeva! Good… Poulin. A bit more power, I doubt that even tickled… Boutin. Well, you can try again when I get back around… Black. Good… Romanov. Good… Potter.”

Harry looks from Riddle to his spider. He doesn’t squish spiders. He catches the big ones and releases them outdoors. The little ones aren’t worth bothering.

“*Avada kedavra*,” Harry says. It doesn’t produce as much as a spark.

Part of him is relieved. The rest of him settles with new understanding. In hindsight, the failure is not surprising. Inevitable, really.

He nods to himself, even as Moody continues. “You need to consider your motive. Find an angle. I’ll be back around later for you to try again.”

“No need,” Harry says. He stows his wand in his holster. “I learnt what I needed to. Lemme out.”

Moody shrugs and taps the glass which sinks into the floor. “Suit yourself. Bones, you’re up.”

Riddle doesn’t move out of the way. He considers Harry like he might a puzzle box which may contain something interesting inside if he can pry it open. Riddle has got something to say and Harry still has champions to watch. Harry settles against the other side. It’s not a wide doorway. Their shoulders almost brush in the middle.

Amelia fails. Cedric produces a flash and Moody predicts he’ll get it with a few more tries. Aubert succeeds immediately, and that one’s a surprise. She’s a muggleborn, so the Supremacists don’t look at her

with respect, but they do take note. She looks very afraid of spiders. It doesn't tell Harry if she'd hesitate against a human, but she is capable, and if she were desperate…

"It isn't like you to give up," Riddle murmurs, contemplative.

Harry hums noncommittally. It isn't giving up – not in the sense that he is accepting defeat or rebelling or anything – and Riddle must know that. He'd be mocking Harry, otherwise. "You heard Moody. The classroom and arena are very different."

He doesn't want to kill an animal just to try a spell, so there is no point trying. But if Bellatrix was standing over Hermione and Harry had a clear shot. Well. He hasn't forgotten how he felt when Bellatrix threatened her before their duel. Harry wonders, if the glass wasn't in the way, could he kill Bellatrix right now, without provocation? Probably not. Not when he knows it wouldn't accomplish anything– he'd likely forfeit his life and abandon his friends to the arena. Even if Harry met Grindelwald in a dark alley– if his death could stop the Games, save everyone. But it wouldn't. The ritual once started must be completed. And the world doesn't run on the whims of one man. The tradition started before Grindelwald and will continue after him.

"Yes. The arena is where it matters," Riddle says. Then, "Would you rather face Poulin or Aubert?"

Aubert cast the spell, Poulin lacked power. Harry doesn't have years of interactions to fall back on, but his first impression of Poulin hasn't gotten any more positive.

"Aubert."

"Quite right," Riddle says with a small smile.

If it's a matter of willingness or power, the former is more dangerous. First year spells are lethal with enough creativity. Sure, the Blood Supremacists trained from the cradle, but so do lots of kids. Ron is a better dueller than the Durmstrang boys – all the Weasley are, they were taught by Molly in case they ended up here. But their lessons focused on survival rather than murder. The thing that makes the Supremacists more dangerous than anyone else is their willingness to kill.

"Would you rather face Poulin or me?" Riddle asks.

Heat curls through Harry. "That," he replies, "is an entirely different

question."

Judging by Riddle's low chuckle, he's well aware, and he knows the answer, too. Harry refuses to look at him, lest he blush for all the room to see.

"I know a secret room. Umbridge's absurd rules need not stop us."

Harry has a brief moment of vertigo where he's not certain Riddle isn't talking about the six-inches-of-separation rule, before he realises Riddle is trying to weasel out of their deal. "Crouch hasn't had much luck, I take it?"

Riddle scowls. "It's early days, yet."

In the end, Harry is one of very few champions that don't make any progress on the killing curse.

…

"Harry!" Hermione shouts and knocks on his door.

"What?" Harry says through toothpaste, only mostly sure he's not still asleep and dreaming.

"Come on!" Hermione grabs his hand as soon as he's through the door and drags him into a broom closet.

There's a large box on the floor. It has a very familiar logo.

Harry gapes, kneeling for a closer look. "How did they send that?"

"I think they left it here," Hermione smiles. Her eyes look suspiciously shiny. She taps the lid. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good."

A lock clicks and Hermione lifts the lid. There's a muffled bang – "Ahh!" – and they're both doused in purple and orange paint. It sparkles.

Harry snickers. Hermione giggles. Hermione leans on Harry to stay upright, and instead they both fall over.

"They always get the last laugh," Harry says, when he can breathe again. His ribs ache.

He looks in the box. The first thing is a bundle of parchment. One has Hermione's name on it, and Harry hands it over while he reads the

other note.

Enjoy our care package,

Love Gred & Forge

P.S. If you haven't tried to sneak out yet, shame on you

"That sounds like a clue," Harry says. "Maybe they've another box in one of the secret passages or the Shack?"

Hermione doesn't respond. There's just a wet sniffle.

"Huh?" Harry says.

Hermione is staring at her letter, eyes watering.

Harry pulls her into a hug and tries to figure out what's wrong, because those aren't happy tears.

"I'm okay," Hermione says, clinging. "I just miss him."

Him? She must mean Fred. They're close, obviously, *really* close. Closer than Hermione is with George, or maybe even Ron but in a different way, and – oh. *Oh*.

Harry blinks. "It's just occurred to me," he says slowly. "My mum's patronus was a doe, not a lioness to match her animagus form. My dad's patronus was a lion. Your patronus is an otter. Clever, curious, notoriously playful, those otters."

"Mmh."

"And Fred's patronus is a red fox."

"Mhmm."

"I can't believe I didn't see it," Harry says. The more he thinks about it, the better they seem to fit. George is the businessman. Fred is the scientist, like Hermione. She's a theorist, he's an experimentalist. No one can make Hermione laugh like Fred can. At some point last year, when Harry wanted to find Hermione his first stop was the twin's workshop instead of the library.

"This has been going on for ages, hasn't it." Harry can't pin down a turning point. Fred and Hermione have been good friends for years, but they can't have been dating the whole time; for one, they both

dated other people last year. The hugging, the inventing binges, the inside jokes – that didn't start overnight.

"Nothing changed," Harry says, puzzled.

"No," Hermione agrees. "I've loved him for years. At some point the shape of it changed and, well, we stopped seeing other people because we found what we were looking for in each other instead. Technically, it's not official, because he'd have to tell Mrs Weasley and that seems… just before the Games…"

Harry pulls her close again and squeezes his eyes shut. Merlin, he hates the Games, demanding that someone like Hermione die to entertain and empower people like Umbridge.

"Where did you say you found the box?"

Hermione turns faintly pink. "Never mind that."

Oh joy, so this is a special broom closet. Harry is just grateful they kept it out of the common room. "You couldn't have taught Ron and Lavender something about discretion?"

Hermione elbows him. "I want to see what we've got."

Harry allows the change of subject. He's curious, too. He recognises most of it. There are extendable ears, fake wands, Peruvian instant darkness powder, a portable swamp, a tornado in a jar, and lots and lots of fireworks.

"Oh, these ones!" Hermione grabs the fireworks. "Instability is built into the arithmancy – it's brilliant. They respond counterproductively to any magic trying to get rid of them; they multiply or explode or combine into bigger displays."

"Nice. The tornado is new. It isn't on their catalogue."

"It's not finished yet. Fred figured out how to make it chase people that try to vanish it, but when we introduced that feature it broke the spell sequence which gets it back in the jar, so it's one use only at the moment."

"Better make it count, then. What's this?" Harry holds up a small square box. There's a ring inside.

"I don't know."

Hermione touches it gingerly. It doesn't zap her, so she puts it on, and she disappears.

Hermione gasps. The invisibility is excellent, much better than disillusionment. If their shoulders weren't touching, Harry wouldn't know she is there.

She pulls it off and reappears, gaping.

"I didn't know they were working on this," she whispers. She turns the ring over gently. It's encircled by a loopy pattern, maybe words.

Harry squints but he doesn't recognise it. "Does that mean something?"

"It's from the Lord of the Rings."

"Your favourite book?" Harry's eyebrows shoot up.

"Yes. The ring could turn people invisible." Hermione traces the words. At her touch, they twist and change. Her eyes widen in surprise.

But in the end it's only a passing thing, this shadow; even darkness must pass.

"He read it," she whispers.

He considers the words. "It's about hope?"

"Yes. Hope, in the darkest hour," she says, and then in a softer voice than when she's quoting from a textbook, " *'By rights we shouldn't even be here. But we are. Like those stories, Mr Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end, because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow; even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines, it'll shine clearer. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn't. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something. There's some good in this world, Mr Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.'* "

It's chilling. Harry doesn't know what to say.

Hermione wipes her eyes.

"This is contraband. We can't be caught with it," she says in her

Prefect voice. “Umbridge would confiscate it. In the interest of efficiency, we should take it to her office.”

Harry drops his arm over her shoulders. “Never wonder why we love you, Hermione.”

Week 2 day two and three

Chapter Summary

> After teaching the champions to cast the imperius curse, Moody thinks it prudent to teach them to resist it. Bit backwards, but better late than never. Also, Harry and Hermione are sick of Umbridge and pass on a gift from the Weasleys.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Moody paces around the room. “Can anyone tell me what spell is responsible for the most deaths in Tournament history?”

“The killing curse?”

“Wrong.”

“Um… blasting curse?”

“Because it’s got more collateral? You’re thinking smarter. But also wrong. No one else?” Moody pauses. He does not look impressed. “The answer is the Imperius curse.”

“Of course,” Hermione whispers.

“Undetectable mind control. It is one of the sneakiest, deadliest weapons in the arena. A killing curse can take down your duelling opponent, but an Imperius can take down an entire alliance. Sabotage and infiltration are very effective tactics.”

Moody paces, his large coat swaying with his uneven gait.

“A century ago, a Durmstrang girl put almost every champion under the curse before they entered the arena. Very quick Games, that year, and not particularly entertaining. Which is why you don’t get to use your wands without supervision until the arena. Can anyone give me another example? Granger.”

“In the last games, Dominique Zarco shattered the Blood Supremacist alliance early in the second task by catching one of the members with Imperius.”

Moody nods. “Aye, Zarco ordered her puppet to return to the alliance and murder as many of his compatriots as he could without being caught. He killed three before being detected, and then it was everyone from themselves. Only two made it out of that brawl alive. ‘Course, Zarco was later eaten by a chimera– shame, that, she was clever. Anyway, today we’ll cover identifying the curse and learn how to resist it.”

Moody abruptly stops and turns, coat flaring out. “Someone in this room is under the Imperius curse. Who is it?”

Harry’s hair stands on end. He glances around quickly, but the first pass doesn’t turn up anything obvious, and neither does a second, more careful look. The trainers are acting the same as always. The trainers Sampson and Miles look like they’re amused by this exercise. All the champions reacted like Harry did– he didn’t notice any delayed or anticipatory reactions.

Riddle is staring at Sampson. Has he spotted something Harry missed? Harry can’t see anything off.

“If the curse is cast correctly there are no signs. If the curse is cast incorrectly or someone has been held under the effects for a long time, the person may appear glassy-eyed or addled. The symptoms are easily mistaken for mild, common conditions such as sleep deprivation. Do a handstand.”

Sampson does a handstand.

Harry narrows his eyes. Did Riddle know? How?

Riddle turns, gaze meeting Harry’s. Harry jolts– caught. Riddle’s lips twitch.

“You can forget about accurately diagnosing someone. Imperioed people will answer security questions correctly, even under truth serums. This is yet another danger of alliances you need to consider. Your only defence against a cursed ally is CONSTANT VIGILANCE.”

Harry absently sidesteps Moody’s stinging hex, which is enough to prevent a scolding about not paying attention, but Harry shouldn’t push his luck. He turns back to the trainers.

“It is possible to resist the curse. It takes a strong will and practice; unfortunately for most people that level of practice occurs after the brain damage sets in,” Moody says. “The only distinct sign of the curse

is the emotional feeling. Now, we will subject each of you to it, so you can recognise it and fight it."

Moody starts calling people up one at a time. Cedric skips around the room, Hermione writes $2 + 2 = 5$ on the blackboard, Amelia does a backflip, and so it goes. The champions perform things they're not normally inclined or able to do. Some of them resist – it takes several tries for Moody to get Bellatrix to curtsy, and it is even more difficult to get Delacour to pick her nose. After half a dozen attempts, Delacour gets to the point where she flatly refuses to do anything she's told. Bellatrix gets more frustrated with every failure, and she fails quicker each time until Moody calls it quits.

So far none of the other Blood Supremacists have performed as well as Bellatrix, but that doesn't stop Romanov blustering. "Moody only made me do a twirl. I didn't even care. If it was something I really didn't want to do I'd have no problem resisting."

For a minute, Harry is sure Bellatrix is going to blast Romanov across the room with her eyes alone, but Moody won't take that comment lying down and whirls on them before it gets interesting.

"Myth!" Moody declares. "The Imperius twists what you want. You won't find loopholes or misinterpret the orders, either, because it makes you want to succeed. All instructions evoke the same feeling, whether it's harmless or will ruin your life. Mothers have butchered their children, smiling as they held the knife."

Romanov earns himself another round of mildly humiliating instructions and proves he cannot just shrug it off. No one can. Until Moody turns his wand on Riddle.

"Jump on the desk," Moody says.

Riddle crosses his arms. "No."

"That's more like it! You're a stubborn one," Harry belatedly identifies the jagged shape Moody's mouth pulls as a grin. He levels his wand with intense concentration. "Again! Sing the national anthem."

"*All in all, it's just another brick in the wall*," Riddle says, droll.

Harry barks a startled laugh. He waves away the stares that fall on him. If they don't get it, he won't be the one to spell it out. Umbridge would string him up by his ankles.

Moody cancels the spell. “Your mentor is Barty Crouch, lad?”

“He is.”

“Aye,” Moody nods to himself. “Crouch used the Unforgivables to great effect in his games. I expect he’s already taken you through this exercise. Well, you’ve mastered it. Ivankova, you’re next.”

Moody soon has the poor girl clucking like a chicken.

Romanov does not welcome Riddle back to their group with open arms. Harry isn’t surprised to see envy from all corners of the room – but the fear in some of them, that is unexpected. This is the first of Riddle’s abilities that isn’t a direct threat to Harry’s life. Either Harry is missing something, or more champions plan to liberally used the Imperius than he assumed. Either is worrying.

“Potter, you’re next.” Moody casts, “Imperio.”

The curse seeps through Harry’s rudimentary occlumency shields like they’re not even there. His shoulders lose their tension. He is completely relaxed. The worry about the Games and the constant feeling of danger from the Slytherins’ proximity fades away. A light happiness takes its place. He feels so much better than he did before, why would he fight it, why would he want to go back?

Do a cartwheel.

That sounds fun. Harry raises his hands. *But why?*

Do a cartwheel. You’re happy. Show me.

He is happy. He wants to do a cartwheel. That doesn’t mean he should.

DO A CARTWHEEL.

In two minds about it, Harry staggers head-first into the ground because his arms aren’t prepared to catch him.

“Ow,” he says, muffled by stone and blood.

“Well done, Potter!”

Not feeling particularly grateful or accomplished, Harry grunts and rolls over. He casts a silent Episkey at his face, wincing as the cartilage snaps back into place. His nose hurts just as much as it had

moving in the other direction.

Squinting, he summons the pieces of his glasses and reassembles them with a quick, “Reparo.”

Moody scowls at the glasses. “Reinforce those and add anti-summoning charms or you’ll meet a grisly end.”

It’s a good point. Harry adds it to his to-do list.

“You fought my control. You almost broke free. Try again.”

Moody tries to make him do another cartwheel. Wanker. Harry sits on the floor, so if he gives in, he won’t have as far to fall. Moody laughs and tells him to bark like a dog. Harry coughs. The impulse is still there. It’s not until the fourth command that Harry throws it off completely.

By then, he’s got emotional whiplash from rapidly switching between happy and annoyed, and he gets Moody to lay off in return for a promise to practice more later in the week. Honestly, Moody could’ve haggled for his first-born.

“That was wild,” Cedric smiles. Under Moody’s direction, Trelawney starts reciting Shakespeare.

“I have so many questions,” Hermione says.

“Was it the occlumency? Maybe I should start learning,” Cedric wonders.

“I don’t think so. Hermione is better at it than me,” Harry says.

Hermione nods. “I tried with shields raised and with my mind completely open and there was no difference.”

Oh, that was clever.

“How did you resist? I couldn’t struggle at all,” Cedric says.

“Neither could I. I didn’t really fight it?” Harry frowns thoughtfully. “Not the way you’re imagining. I didn’t argue. I don’t know what Moody meant about being stubborn, that’s not what it felt like.”

By the looks on their faces, Cedric and Hermione don’t understand what he’s saying either.

“I wanted to follow the instructions,” Harry tries to explain. He thinks he understands; the tricky part is putting it into words. But he’s been contemplating the dissociation between desires and decisions, recently. Harry glances at Riddle. Yep, still wants to duel him. “I just, I dunno, recognise that because I want to do something that doesn’t mean I should do it.”

“You’re resisting the temptation,” Cedric says.

“Yeah. It’s not so different to resisting other things you want. It isn’t about not feeling – you can’t control how you feel – but you can control how you act on those feelings. I think… if you acknowledge the feelings, recognise how they could influence your decisions, it reduces their power over you. You can decide, with a clear head, whether to follow the impulse.”

“You might follow it anyway?” Hermione tilts her head. “Not disagree on principle?”

Harry nods. “If the order made sense, say, Moody told me to eat treacle tart for dessert, I think I would’ve done it.”

“If you were going to do it anyway, I think the argument could be made that he wasn’t controlling you,” Hermione says.

“Maybe. Maybe not. I wouldn’t have thrown off the spell.”

“Sure, but if it can’t influence you, then it’s just a cheering charm,” Cedric says.

Hermione looks at Harry like he’s an academic principle that’s just clicked. She crosses her arms. “So you’re not an impulsive person. Then all those detentions…”

“An acceptable price for the privilege of hexing Malfoy,” Harry grins.

Cedric’s lips twitch. “Detentions are supposed to be a deterrent, not a transaction.”

Harry shrugs.

Moody sends a curse skimming over their heads. It gets their attention. “We start this training early to give you time to build up resistance. There will be another group session scheduled, or you can approach one of the trainers if you want extra practice. Class over!”

…

“AYEEE!”

A girlish shriek echoes through the room.

Harry and Hermione look up from their runes. Amelia and Görder raise their heads apprehensively.

There’s a thud. Ominous silence. Another, louder bang.

“Stay inside.” The trainers draw their wands. Two leave to check out the noise while the rest stand guard.

It’s louder with the door open. The shrieking clearly belongs to Umbridge. Her office just happens to be close by.

Crack.

Crack. Whizzz. Bang! Crack.

“AH! Don’t vanish them! They multiply!”

BOOM!

“Don’t stun them either!”

WHoooOOSH

“Impedimenta just makes them faster!”

“EEEK!”

There’s a flash of singed pink as Umbridge sprints past the doorway as fast as she can while hobbled by her skirt. A multitude of colourful sparklers and comets streak after her. It’s hard to tell if the trailing smoke is from the fireworks or the Inquisitor.

A spinning purple wheel lurches toward their door. The closest trainer casts, “Protego!”

The firework bounces off and shatters into pieces. Each piece turns red and pinballs around the corridor like an angry hornet.

“Don’t worry, Lizzy,” Amelia tells Görder. “This kind of thing happens a lot here. They’re not very dangerous.”

Some of the red sparklers hit the shield again. They split in two, turn green and rocket up to the ceiling where they explode in a shower of glitter.

The shield shatters after a few hits and the fireworks spill inside.

It is an excellent excuse to run out of the room. Most of the chaos is moving away; Harry and Hermione don't want to miss it.

They run through the corridors, dodging the occasional explosion, to the main staircase. The fireworks have already made it there and have spread to all the floors, travelling faster than the warning not to jinx them.

From the steadily increasing sound of it, the fireworks that headed toward the combat room have done very well for themselves.

So now there are *lots* of fireworks startling portraits, bouncing off omnioculars, and teasing Peeves.

The main staircase is lit top to bottom like a chandelier. It's beautiful, in a very noisy way. The sweetest noise of all is the pure indignant rage somewhere below.

Two pinwheels collide and, in the blinding flash, go from blue to Weasley purple and orange, in a familiar shape, and Harry just knows that wherever they are, the Hogwarts students are cheering. A snake slithers through the grinning skull's mouth, sets sparking white eyes on Umbridge, and charges.

Harry's face unconsciously echoes that grin – a bit feral, a bit nasty, which is fitting. The snake and skull is the symbol students doodle on their homework when they get an unfair grade. It was once boldly graffitied on a hated teacher's door to celebrate them getting the sack. It's one of the symbols on the twins' skiving snackboxes. It means defiance and rebellion. They don't know where it came from, but it's no wonder the twins latched gleefully onto the symbolism.

"Oh dear," Professor Dumbledore says cheerfully, from the floor above. Moody limps up beside him, wand drawn, eye spinning wildly.

"Dumbledore! Fix this!" Umbridge shouts. She runs as fast as she can, which is nowhere near fast enough. The snake toys with her, herding her in circles before opening its jaws wide enough to swallow her whole. The snake chomps down and explodes into a thousand firecrackers as the skull laughs.

“Have you tried vanishing them?” Dumbledore asks. There is a sparkler bouncing on top of his hat.

“Yes. Don’t do it!” A trainer says. “It creates a dozen more!”

“Does it really?” Dumbledore casts evanesco. “What marvellous magic!”

Harry trusts George to jump on this marketing opportunity.

“Dumbledore!” Umbridge shrieks.

“Never fear. I expect they will disappear on their own. It’s a bit of harmless fun,” Dumbledore says.

Harry can see steam coming off Umbridge from here. Or, no, she’s just smouldering. “Harmless! Someone has tried to make a mockery of this esteemed tournament and they will be punished!”

“If I am correct, these are a product of Weasley Wizard Wheezes. My professors confiscated many of their wares this year. Some must have been overlooked when the students and staff left. Indeed, these fireworks are unstable by design and they may have been set off by accident, perhaps by a very alarmed boggart.”

Harry meets Dumbledore’s twinkling gaze and admires the way he can lie without lying.

Dumbledore starts down the staircase, “I will do what I can, of course.” He pauses briefly passing Harry, and says quietly, just for the two of them. “Mr Potter, I heard your altercation with Miss Black was due to you standing up in defence of a friend.”

“Er, yes, sir.”

“There is nobility in that, no matter what people might tell you,” Dumbledore claps a surprisingly strong hand on his shoulder. “Well done, my boy.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Harry feels scalding heat on the side of his face and his hair stands on end. He turns to meet Snape’s truly poisonous glare.

“Potter, Granger. It is time for our lesson,” Snape says.

Harry could protest that they haven’t finished with runes, yet, or eaten

dinner. But no one is looking at them yet, and attention or scrutiny right now could be very unfortunate. He and Hermione were careful, but no cover is airtight.

Snape has never needed proof to lay blame on Harry and Hermione, but Harry knows he's going to hunt it down as they start occlumency practice. With a target and preparation, it is easier to protect those few memories than his whole mind. Snape finds his way around the defences or batters them down eventually, as he always does.

When Harry's vision clears, he finds himself with a splitting headache, facing Snape's glinting eyes.

"Well, well. You're just like your father. Arrogant. Reckless. Can you even comprehend the consequences, I wonder?"

It would be a threat, but Snape doesn't immediately rat them out to Umbridge. He's being careful with his words around the omnioculars, even. Either he doesn't hate them that much, or he hates Umbridge more.

Snape can't yell at them without incriminating them, but he makes his displeasure very clear. "It is time to practice your duelling, Potter."

Ah, shit.

…

It's late and Harry is exhausted but there's a lot of stairs between him and his bed.

He trudges up, flight after flight, mindful enough to skip the trick steps but little else.

"Password?" the Fat Lady asks.

Harry blinks. He opens his mouth, then hesitates. He turns around. His feet take him further, to the Room of Requirement.

I need a wand, I need a wand, I need a wand.

Harry opens the door to a cluttered sitting room that reminds him a bit of Ollivanders. There's a row of wands on the table. Harry picks them up one by one and sets aside the wands that don't feel dead or wrong. He narrows the shortlist down to a couple which don't feel too bad.

He'd rather use his own. He considers using the spare wand to unlock his holster, but he doesn't know if there are any alerts built into the enchantments.

One of the wands is a red wood of some kind. Harry tries that first. "Expecto patronum!"

The spell fights him, producing a white shield, but not a corporeal form.

Harry tries with a black wand next. It's reluctant, but Prongs lands in front of him, looking around for something to charge.

"If Sirius is alone, tell him I can talk now," Harry says.

The stag bobs his head and vanishes in a flash.

Harry goes to the chair –one of the Gryffindor ones, nice– and waits. There are no portraits or omnioculars to dob him in. Patronus messages haven't been explicitly forbidden, but he suspects that is only because the possibility hasn't occurred to Umbridge. The owlery has been completely cleared out so a communication embargo is heavily implied.

Harry doesn't want to get caught. He doesn't want to get his friends or family in trouble either, and the Ministry could be watching almost any of them, but Sirius is still on the run.

There's another flash and Padfoot bounds down from the ceiling. "Harry! How are you?"

Merlin, it's good to hear his voice. Harry sags back into his chair, releasing tension he didn't realise he was carrying.

Harry summons Prongs again. "Better now. I don't know how often I'll be able to get away. Umbridge has it out for me."

"I saw that. Don't let that bitch get under your skin. And please don't let my psychotic cousin curse you," Sirius sounds sweet, light, and utterly furious.

"Hey, I thought I managed that fight pretty well. I got a lot of information out of it."

"She cast the Cruciatus at you. If she was from any other family I'd start a blood feud, but I suppose I have to disown her first."

Harry chokes on spit. “She lives a few rooms away from where I *sleep*, Sirius. I’m not supposed to die yet.”

“You’re not allowed to die *at all*,” Sirius growls. “Bella’s been out of control for years. I won’t tolerate it anymore.”

“Wait until the tasks, at least,” Harry says. She might not even hear about it, then. And if she does, well, she’s already going to hunt him down in the arena, what’s a little more fuel on the fire?

Sirius’ reply takes a while. “Fine. How can I help?”

“This. Talking helps, and– actually. Information. You can give me information,” Harry realises. “How is the media spinning it? Who’s the favourite with the sponsors? Are there any secret alliances I don’t know about? Anyone getting chatty with their mentors about secret abilities?”

“Ganz is holding back in the public duels, she’s much faster with her mentor. She specialises in classical style, she’s not particularly strong with transfiguration. Poulin is a snake animagus – a small brown thing, I don’t know the species. The papers are slandering you. They’re taking their cues from Umbridge, calling you a trouble-seeker.”

Harry raises an eyebrow into the empty room. “Is it working?”

“It’ll always work on some people – some people don’t think, they just believe what they’re told. Did you set off the fireworks? They were brilliant.”

Harry smiles, the irritation sliding onto the backburner. “Hermione did the honours. I was the lookout – I make better bait if we need to divert Umbridge’s attention. We used a delayed fuse and planted it invisibly, so by the time it went off we’d have solid alibis.”

“Good work. Be careful. Umbridge is a nasty piece of work. She’ll make you pay if she catches you.”

…

The fireworks will fizzle out after a few hours if they’re left alone, so of course they persist for days. They exceed even Hermione’s expectations. Once Umbridge figures out trying to control or corral the fireworks is unproductive, she turns to controlling everyone else instead. Soon, there is a fourth training decree: Champions are not permitted to interact with any external paraphernalia. And yeah,

Harry knows what she *means*, but did she have to word it like *that*?

After the powers that be make their displeasure known, the trainers started clamping down on the champions 'accidentally' hitting the fireworks during lessons. Umbridge is too busy policing the policy to pick on anyone in particular. It makes for a peaceful few days.

Harry wouldn't be surprised if Dumbledore's sense of humour and Moody's jumpiness have something to do with the fireworks. Evidently, neither would Umbridge because she soon sets omnioculars following those two around, and soon after, anyone else with an unlocked wand.

It means Harry can sometimes walk between rooms without a thousand eyes watching his every move. It almost feels like freedom.

"Riddle?" Harry wonders. The boy is standing next to a suit of armour. Harry doesn't know if he's just interrupted something or if he was expected. Either option feels like a trap.

"Hm?" Riddle turns, exuding innocence. His eyes dart over Harry's shoulder to the empty corridor and his posture relaxes into something a little more natural, more sinister.

"Good morning, Harry. Heading to healing?" Riddle says. Harry doesn't want to know why Riddle pays attention to his schedule. Riddle draws a hand from his pocket and Harry doesn't tense only because Riddle also turns to face the armour.

There is a firework stuck to his fingertip. Riddle drops it into the helmet and slams the visor closed. Then Riddle wandlessly casts a short-term sealing spell and a cleaning charm on the armour– a cleaning charm that vanishes anything that touches the surface it is applied to.

What at first sounded like a dropped coin rattling around in there very soon sounds like a nest of angry bees.

"Healing, yeah, the trainers are expecting me," Harry says, lips twitching.

"What a coincidence," Riddle says as he strolls over. "I also have a pressing need to be elsewhere."

Because he's been making *firework dispensers*.

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” Harry says. He doesn’t know Riddle well enough to gauge his sense of humour, but he supposes humour isn’t required – only an appreciation of chaos and spite. “You can hold a grudge.”

Riddle flashes teeth at him. “I’d say it’s less me holding a grudge than Umbridge rekindling it with every encounter.”

Harry finds himself grinning back. It hasn’t escaped his notice that Riddle’s fingers are twitching in a subtle pattern. Harry has never seen a hallway so spotless. Harry can think of several ward clusters that would produce more fireworks, but perhaps not for as long, because they’d be found. No one looking for suspicious, out-of-place magic will suspect cleaning charms. It's clever. A subtle kind of genius Harry didn’t expect from Riddle, whose style veers more towards blatant and shameless.

A flash of heat goes down Harry’s spine. Just how flexible is Tom Riddle?

Riddle eyes him and Harry gets the distinct feeling of being caught.

“You should call your elf friend. I’m certain our guests would prefer the corridors near their quarters to be cleaned of all these unsightly scorch marks. Their rooms need airing out, too. He should open their windows.”

Harry tucks his hands in his pockets. “I’m sure he’d be delighted.”

They emerge onto the first floor from a secret passageway between two stone walls which rotate every six and a quarter hours. Riddle tosses a sparkler over his shoulder as the passage seals, looking entirely innocent before the omnioculars in the main staircase home in on them. Except, they don’t. The omnioculars turn away, oblivious. There are no witnesses to associate Harry and Riddle with the location of the utter carnage that will soon be unleashed, or spot them together without a chaperone.

“Did you know the omnioculars are enchanted to follow movement? They keep getting in amidst the fireworks,” Riddle says, gesturing casually. He doesn’t break eye contact with Harry. Harry catches it on the edge of his vision – the omnioculars are *gleaming*.

“You cheeky bastard,” Harry murmurs. He looks closer, and it’s not just one or two clean omnioculars, it’s every single one of them. Merlin, few people could manage that with a wand.

So Harry is fucked, but what else is new. Actually, Riddle is showing off, no– *teasing* him. That is new. Harry blushes to the tips of his ears, and with that, unfortunately, they are back to treading familiar ground.

…

Their subterfuge would be wasted by walking into a class together, so Harry waits outside the healing room until the greetings die down. When Harry enters, Riddle is running through the standard questions the healers use to assess abilities, which means he hasn't attended a healing lesson before. Most champions haven't. Harry is surprised the healing lessons aren't more popular, considering it's literally life-saving stuff. He supposes some, like Bellatrix, won't need to bother – she'll be delivered a potion for any scrape or bruise as long as she holds the Ministry's favour. Still, most champions won't be so popular with the sponsors. Although, it does make a certain amount of sense to prioritise self-defence. Prevention is better than a cure, especially since a lot of magic is so damaging that one touch means death.

That said, tripping over, breaking an ankle and being eaten by an acromantula would be a stupid way to go.

"What's with the pig?" Harry asks.

"The bone mending spell is finicky," Hopkirk says. "You managed the spell well enough yesterday, but recall I said the delicacy of the casting must suit the bone. It will take practice on a variety of bones to get a feel for it. We use pigs because their anatomy is similar to humans."

Hopkirk aims a bone-breaker at the pig without any more preamble.

The pig squeals and Harry flinches. It can barely twitch. Paralysed or petrified, Harry realises feeling sick, so it can't run away.

"Ah, apologies for disturbing your lesson," Hopkirk tells Riddle. "*Silencio*."

"*Leniens*," Harry casts the pain-relieving spell. The pig's eyes continue to roll wildly, confused and afraid.

"It's temporary. It'll be fixed in a jiffy," Hopkirk assures him.

Harry looks around but the other healers are paying them no mind. This is normal. Why is this normal?

Hopkirk places a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder. "It's just an animal."

Harry shrugs him off. "It's just a numbing spell."

It costs nothing. Why didn't it occur to them?

"Well, it shouldn't interfere with the treatment," Hopkirk says. "Start with the diagnosis. Identify which bones are broken, how many, and classify the fractures. There will be swelling and soft tissue damage to contend with, as well. The living body is complicated, you see, you cannot learn healing from a spell list."

…

Harry stops in the bathroom before dinner. He goes into a stall and sits with his head in his hands. If only he didn't have to learn these things. If only his life and his friends' lives didn't hang in the balance. But they do.

He sighs, sits up, and shakes himself. He needs to get a move on with wandless magic. Riddle could've done anything he wanted in the corridors, and Harry wouldn't have been able to stop him.

If only it wasn't the Games. If it was just a regular competition, he'd fight Riddle every day, revel in the struggle, push each other to greater heights just for the hell of it. But in all likelihood, there will be just one fight, and when the curtains fall one of them will be dead. The fight itself might be challenging and glorious but death is not. In the end, it will just be over.

Harry raises his hand, "Protego."

The shimmery shield appears, a little faster than yesterday. He washes his hands and there's no one in the bathroom, so he tries again. "Protego."

He'll practice a little bit every night until he gets it down to a twitch of his fingers, and then practice some more for good measure.

He scrubs water over his face, wondering when he started feeling so clammy.

Maybe it's possible to cast spells with both hands. Maybe he can shield with the left hand and still use his wand. No one has told him otherwise.

Harry switches to his left hand. “Protego.”

The movement feels weird and ungainly. Nothing happens.

“Protego,” he tries again.

Chapter End Notes

The song Tom quotes is ‘Another Brick in the Wall’ by Pink Floyd.

Also, Hermione quoted Lord of the Rings last chapter, which I forgot to credit, but I don’t think many of you were wondering who’s this Frodo bloke she’s talking about.

We’ve also had a pertinent hobbit reference (way back, before Harry duelled Bellatrix), for anyone playing attention.

Week 2 day three, four and five

Chapter Summary

> In which Umbridge causes more trouble and it turns out there might be more to Fleur than Harry has seen so far.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A click of heels.

Harry ducks into the Herbology section, praying she hasn't seen him. Across the isle, a pair of Beauxbatons girls have the same idea and move deeper into the library.

Umbridge's shrill voice carries. "Mr Krum. Miss Granger. What do you think you are doing?"

"Did I say something inappropriate?" Krum replies, bewildered.

"Dear, you must follow the rules. Pairs of champions must always have a chaperone."

"Please, Madam Umbridge, we are not alone," Hermione says politely, probably pointing to Harry's chair and stack of books.

"But they are not here now, are they?" Umbridge says.

Damn it. Harry scans the shelves for the book he needs.

"There are many people in this library," Krum points out.

"Champions among the stacks are not effective chaperones, Mr Krum."

"Then… I cannot use the library… if there is someone else in it?"

"The rules are not that strict," *yet*, is implied. "But you will sit at separate tables. This is an important safety measure. We cannot have champions brawling before the arena."

" 'scuse me," Harry says, sliding into his seat.

"Mr Potter," Umbridge bristles.

“Good evening,” Harry says. He opens his book, intending to get on with his morbid survey of the terrifying plants of the world while Krum and Hermione go back to their academic discussion.

“We did not think this was against the rules,” Krum says.

“Mr Potter is not a responsible *adult* chaperone,” Umbridge says.

Details about the chaperone weren’t specified in the decree, but okay.

“Pairs of champions need a chaperone,” Harry says. He is tempted to count to three on his fingers. “We are not a pair.”

Umbridge’s nostrils flair and she smiles sweetly. “Come with me, Mr Potter.”

Harry gapes. He didn’t even say anything smartarsed about protecting Krum’s virtue!

“Mr Krum, Miss Granger – as Mr Potter is no longer available, you will move to separate tables or you will be punished.”

Umbridge takes Harry to her office. There’s an auror station outside the door, now. She’s upped security.

“Nothing to report, Madam Umbridge,” the auror says.

Umbridge waves him off. “To your patrol, then.”

Harry had forgotten how horrendously pink the office was.

“Sit on the chair, Mr Potter. Face the corner. Think about what you did wrong.”

She’s putting him in time out, he realises. What does she think he is– five?

“Is something the matter?”

He shakes his head, incredulously, and doesn’t say anything smartarsed about that, either. Though he wonders what the point of restraint is if he gets punished either way.

He sits in the chair.

Hah. She missed a scorch mark.

Umbridge goes to her desk. Harry does not like her being where he can't see her.

"Sit up straight, Mr Potter. Good posture is important."

He doesn't ask how long he's going to be here. After the first ten minutes, it's obvious she's waiting for him to ask, because she wants to answer. He knows her type. *As long as I say*. He can spite her, this little bit. And undermine her other objectives. He identifies several quickly: she's wasting his time – it's the only valuable thing he has left. She might also be trying to drive him slowly insane with boredom or the cats. Merlin, he hates them; their discordant mewing is a form of slow torture.

This room would be greatly improved by a tornado or a swamp or a rogue bludger, but if he retaliates every time he gets in trouble, she'll notice the pattern. Maybe after a few days. And the pranks shouldn't always be in her office either, but he wants to do something, just to prove that her auror guards can't stop him.

But the swamp, in particular, could be more inconvenient somewhere else, like a busy thoroughfare. There's got to be a point along the route from the Ministry employee quarters that they can't bypass. He'll have to check the junction near Sir Cadogan's portrait.

With that ticked off his to-do list, Harry continues to make good use of the time. He practices occlumency. He's missing his afternoon lesson with Snape and McGonagall. Snape is going to make him pay for that. Hermione will explain, but it's never helped before. He works through the focusing exercises he's figured out, no thanks to Snape. That only occupies him for so long. Next, he tries wandless, wordless magic.

He pictures the rune stones, just down the hall. Concentrates on how much he wants it *here.* He recalls the feeling of the spell moving through him.

Accio, he thinks.

True nonverbal magic removes the crutch of the incantation, but Harry can barely cast wandlessly when speaking aloud. Eventually he'll phase out the words until he can cast with just a wish. But one step at a time.

Accio.

Accio.

There's a faint clatter in the hall.

Umbridge's quill pauses.

Harry grins. A kitten hisses at him suspiciously.

Accio.

KNOCK.

Harry looks at the door. It'd be suspicious otherwise.

"Face the wall," Umbridge says.

Accio.

KNOCK.

Umbridge gets up.

Depulso.

The stone clatters away, down the hall.

"Who is there?" Umbridge says.

No one answers. She shuts the door and sits back down.

He's breaking her first rule right in front of her and she has no idea. He must not laugh.

Accio. Depulso.

KNOCK. Clatter.

"Aberto," Umbridge casts and the door opens. "Revelio." Nothing.

He knows she's poised with wand ready at the door. She thinks she's playing a waiting game. She'll be disappointed.

Harry pictures the pond slime in the lake. That gross, green muck that sits just beneath the surface. The lake is much further away. He's not sure he can do it.

Accio.

Accio.

Accio.

Accio…

An hour later, the incantation has stopped sounding like a real word, so Harry has dropped it entirely. He focuses on the feeling, the tug. He wants pond slime. He could greatly improve this room with a few handfuls.

SPLAT.

Both Umbridge and Harry jump and spin to the window.

Harry turns to face the wall again before she can order him to – and before he smirks.

She keeps him there for four hours. It's after midnight and he's wandlessly repaired a loose thread in his shirt, tied and untied his shoelaces, and turned one of his buttons into a beetle. He tests his fine control by turning his socks light grey and back to normal. It gets easier with every spell.

"Turn around, Mr Potter," Umbridge says at last. "Have you thought about what you did wrong?"

"Yeah."

"Well?"

Ugh. What does she want to hear? "I broke the rules."

"What else?"

"I spoke back."

"Hmm, well if that's the best you can do. I think you had better return tomorrow. Off to bed, now."

It's a leaf straight from Snape's playbook. There are no right answers, some are just more wrong than others.

She'll punish him because she doesn't like him, and because she can.

Harry leaves and closes the door. Behind it, the office is a bit *off*. It's barely perceptible, just different enough to cause a niggling sense of wrongness. Unless someone pointed out the specifics, you'd never realise the cause.

Some of the cat portraits are slightly tilted. The colours have shifted, just marginally more orange in places and purple in others. Instead of a single shade of pink, things clash a little.

It'd almost be a shame to trash it now that it's perfectly constructed to drive a control-freak like Umbridge mad.

…

The common room is dark, but Harry can make out a fuzzy head of hair by the fire. Hermione didn't look up when he entered, though.

"Hermione," Harry steps closer. She's asleep. "Wake up."

"Huh? Harry!"

"You shouldn't sleep here. It's not safe."

"I didn't think you'd be gone so long, and then you didn't come back. I was just resting my eyes."

"Uhuh," Harry looks at the clock.

Hermione follows his gaze. "Goodness! Umbridge kept you half the night!"

She's been 'resting her eyes' for a while, then.

"What'd she do?" Hermione asks.

Harry shakes his head. "I'll complain in the morning. Let's go to bed."

Hermione is still half asleep and takes very little convincing.

Harry is too keyed up, just yet. He bursts into his room and points at his trunk and concentrates. His pyjamas fly into his hand, slower than he'd like, but they get there.

He needs more oomph. A little more practice.

His next attempt feels right and his toothbrush flies straight. He takes particular delight in trying the undressing charm for the memories it brings with it. Harry and Ron learned it along with shoelace tying and hair brushing spells to rile up Hermione with their laziness, although, in hindsight, he's not sure if she actually goaded them into doing it to make them show up to classes looking less like they'd been bailed up by brigands in the hallways.

Harry banishes his dirty clothes to the hamper for the elves and soon the room is a mess of loose objects flying all over the place. It's not the most efficient way to get ready for bed, but it's fun.

He's got this.

Harry banishes the debris off the bed and throws himself down, unable to keep the grin off his face. He cups a hand, concentrates, and the light that appears in his palms is a pale approximation of his glee, but it's a start. He knows how to do it, now it's just a matter of practice.

…

Harry wakes groggy, hauled ignominiously from the deepest stage of his sleep cycle by his alarm. He almost falls back asleep the moment he turns it off.

Harry makes it to their mentors' training room a few minutes after 6:30, bleary eyed, and thanks Merlin it is McGonagall's turn to run the show. She's not impressed with his tardiness, but anything is better than Snape invading his mind – even speed running the NEWT transfiguration curriculum. They've progressed from conjuration to human transfiguration this week, and it takes every scrap of concentration Harry can muster.

He's barely sat down to breakfast when –

"Hem hem."

Harry takes a deep breath and turns around, "Yes?"

"I told you to go to my office for your time-out, Mr Potter," Umbridge says. The Blood Supremacists snicker. "You'll make up the time, of course, and I think this calls for additional punishment, don't you? Punctuality and listening skills are essential for any civilised wizard."

It's on the tip of his tongue to object, because she didn't specify a time, but she's revealed her cards: listening skills– that's what she wants to accuse him of, and she'll get him for the backchat again, as well.

"My *deepest* apologies. I forgot to ask you for the meeting time," Harry smiles sweetly, shifting the blame before she can do it. There. Now she can't even control the narrative.

The triumph in her gaze is snuffed out. “Watch your tone, Mr Potter.”

She drags him to her office and sticks him back in time-out.

Harry wonders if Umbridge is actively sabotaging him or if disrupting his sleep, meals and training are just a happy side effect. In the end, that’s much less interesting to consider than how else he can subtly mess up her office. Yesterday’s changes are already paying dividends. She hesitated for a moment at her doorway when they arrived, a frown on her face. It warmed the very cockles of his heart.

Harry has only been there for a couple hours when a harried auror bursts in. “Madam Umbridge, the fireworks are back!”

Umbridge gets up, clatters toward the door on her heals and hesitates. She needs to get on top of the fireworks before they get out of control again – they just about sent the castle to the moon yesterday. Riddle’s containment spells fell at precisely 12:31 and a lot of fireworks soon turned into a truly stupendous number as they bumped into the vanishing charms Riddle had laid all over the castle. There was scarce room to move, and anyone in the halls or without the foresight to close their doors was forced to flee outside. Most of the patrolling aurors and Ministry officials were banished for hours.

Harry smirks at the wall as Umbridge slowly turns over the dilemma: let him out early or leave him alone in her office. She could make him return later, but something tells Harry she’ll be a bit busy.

“Out, Mr Potter. I hope you’ve learned your lesson.”

Harry schools his features. “Of course, Madam Umbridge.”

Harry goes straight to the gym. He’s missed his regular workout time. He’ll be quick, cut into healing lessons and get back on track by lunchtime. He’s hungry.

“McLaggen, I need to hit something.”

Later, relaxed and satisfied, Harry catches up with Hermione in their healing lessons.

“Hermione, you’re a lifesaver,” Harry beams. To anyone listening, he could be commenting about her progress with treating organ failure. He isn’t.

“It wasn’t me,” Hermione mutters under her breath.

Harry straightens. *Well*, then. The fireworks disappeared entirely after their last hurrah. If Hermione didn't dip into their stash to set more off, then someone has preserved them. Three guesses who.

…

"I had an interesting dream," Trelawny tells Harry at lunch. "When you leave the arena, it will not be because you are the victor or a survivor."

Hermione is in the library. Trelawny doesn't seem to care either way, but it does save Harry an argument he wants no part of. "Will I be eaten, then, or will there be enough of me left to be worth a body bag?"

Trelawny straightens with interest and grabs Harry's teacup – the decoy he's taken to using so she'll leave his pumpkin juice alone. Forecasting his doom keeps her occupied for the rest of the meal.

Harry can't get a read on her. She acts like she's been told she's special her whole life and desperately wants to believe it, but Roger, who knows her best isn't impressed with her gift. It isn't uncommon for Seers with only middling talent to get lauded, as even that is rare. The Goblet did select her, however, and it couldn't have made than decision on her spellwork. So she's probably a real Seer, but she could be hamming it up to unnerve them – that's what Harry would do.

"The leaves do not say you will be eaten," Trelawny declares. "But they do not say you *won't* be, either."

Maybe she's no great talent. Maybe the cup isn't useful in this instance. Maybe it is showing answers and Trelawny is keeping them to herself. Harry can't check, he's got no affinity for divination. The most he'll ever get are warnings too vague to be any use. He doesn't fancy planning his day around his horoscope – it's as likely to backfire as the help. Divination is one of the training sessions he never bothers attending.

True talent with divination is formidable, though. The ability to foresee threats and prepare for them, undermine enemy plans, scry places or people or objectives. Harry would rather have that with him than against him, for damn sure.

Amelia steps over the bench and grabs a plate. There's a thunderous look on her face.

“What’s wrong?” Cedric asks. He raises his arm to drop over her shoulders, but then he remembers the six-inches rule and hovers for a moment before awkwardly lowering his arm.

“There’s a new decree,” Amelia stabs an egg. It bursts into a gooey mess. “We’re not allowed to play music during study hours.”

“For Merlin’s sake,” Cedric mutters. “What’s the harm?”

“Umbridge told us off yesterday. She said some nonsense about disrupting quiet study time. We *weren’t* – it was just me and Elisabeth Görder and Mr Scamander. Elisabeth says it helps her concentrate and she was right, it was really nice! And then Umbridge said Mr Scamander shouldn’t be helping a champion from a rival school. Mr Scamander said that wasn’t in the rules and he was only there to chaperone us. She said ‘we’ll see’ and now look what she’s done! She’s so unfair!”

Passing the notice board on the way out, Harry spots something Amelia overlooked – some discreet edits to the earlier decrees.

“Sneaky cow,” Harry says, pointing. “Look. Pairs of champions must always have a *Ministry approved* chaperone.”

Cedric grimaces. “What do you want to bet mentors and other champions aren’t Ministry approved?”

They’re not, and Umbridge is waiting outside the Hall to prove it. They can’t even walk between lessons together. Later in the day, Delacour earns a timeout for being in the same hallway as Stoeva, and they weren’t even going in the same direction.

There only time the champions get to see each other is in the Great Hall for meals, when they’re supposed to be making alliances; in the training rooms, when they’re too busy to chat; and in the common room if the auror is standing guard, which isn’t the best place to linger for Bellatrix-shaped reasons.

For all that Umbridge touts champion safety, she does nothing to curb Bellatrix’s threats. This doesn’t feel like a response to their behaviour, no, this feels pre-emptive.

…

“This is outrageous!” says a woman with a heavy French accent.

“Is it?” Umbridge replies icily.

Harry slows before he rounds the corner. They must be in the main staircase. Harry can’t go around without hiking up to the six floor and taking a secret passage down to the third. He considers it. But if Umbridge is occupied she shouldn’t bother him.

He keeps walking. What’s outrageous, is their difference in height. The French witch is as tall as Hagrid.

“You display blatant favouritism and prejudice. Fleur is the only champion found in violation of your dress code. It is a clear double standard,” Maxime says. Right, she is Delacour’s mentor.

“The rules are quite simple–”

“Simple! How can it be simple when your dress code changes by the day? Most of the time there is not even specific violation of the code, those Durmstrang troublemakers only accuse her of being ‘distracting’ and that is enough for punishment!”

“Magical alterations to appearance and apparel are forbidden in Part 38C of the dress code.”

“Fleur has excellent control over her allure.”

“In that case, I’m inclined to classify it as active magic, which, as you know, is strictly forbidden outside of official practice locations. The punishment would be much more severe.”

“I assure you, Fleur has not used it once in this castle. In fact, she has lodged several official complaints against trainers for their inappropriate attention bordering on harassment, and I have yet to see any action taken against them.”

Harry keeps his head down and hurries past. The women glare daggers at each other.

“Harassment! Don’t be absurd. There is nothing of the sort.”

“They persist with their attention when Fleur makes it clear with plain language that it is not welcome. They should not lust so. She is a *child*.”

“There will be no action against the trainers. They have not touched her inappropriately; they have done nothing wrong. Miss Delacour is

an ingrained attention seeker, and she is only reaping the consequences."

"How *dare* you. You are making their behaviour worse by offering them excuses and suggesting they need not curb themselves. The trainers are not ensorcelled. The fault lies with their behaviour, not her appearance."

"I have a list of dress code violations that suggest otherwise."

"Socks at the improper length? Rolled up sleeves? If your trainers cannot handle seeing an elbow, they should not be working with children. The trainers are responsible for controlling their own behaviour. If they cannot, then I insist they be removed."

"You do not get to insist. I am Inquisitor and I run this castle by order of Minister Grindelwald. To question my authority is to question the Ministry itself! Such a thing will not be borne. I will have no dissenters in these walls, I trust you take my meaning?"

Their voices fade away as Harry hurries down the stairs. That was uncomfortable. His mind keeps morbidly replaying their words and shying away in turns.

Harry tries to judge people on their actions rather than appearance, and Delacour's actions consistently mark her as a rude, unfriendly person.

Maybe that's understandable.

Harry knows people can read way too much into a kind word, but in his experience that mostly leads to embarrassing misunderstandings, not something so creepy. If Harry had to deal with that kind of attention all the time, he wouldn't be friendly to strangers. Maybe Delacour is rude deliberately to keep people away, maybe she just dreads talking to people and that's how it comes across.

His mum used to say people are always more complicated than they appear.

Just food for thought.

By dinner time, there is another notice.

Training Decree 6: Criticism of the Games, the Ministry, or Ministry personnel is sedition and will be punished as such.

The punishment is probably not timeout or scrubbing cauldrons, if Harry were to hazard a guess. Sedition is one of those fun crimes that gives the Ministry a blank cheque to do what they want with you. You can land in Azkaban if you're loud enough; that's where most of Grindelwald's political enemies end up.

Mouthy champions might be too dangerous to be left alive. They have an audience and fans, no matter that the Ministry controls which words make it through, the Ministry can't filter the words of the survivors. So the Ministry will ensure they are not among the survivors. It would be bad luck, of course. Britain doesn't officially use the death penalty. This is supposed to be an honour, after all.

…

Harry progresses from quarterstaffs to spears to swords and winds up aching in new and interesting ways. As far as useful skills go, it isn't one, not against a capable witch or wizard. He's just about the only champion that bothers with it. Bellatrix likes knives, and the other Blood Supremacists show up enough to make it clear that they know how to handle the weapons. They've clearly trained for years with everything under the sun, but wands are much more useful than blades and that's their focus. Harry doesn't care if it's a practical skill – sparing is a physical workout and it's much more interesting than push ups and squats. It keeps him sane and fit. His head feels screwed on right.

But Harry's real love is the agility course. The race against Krum was such a success that it bears repeating. Harry races McLaggen and his friends when he can persuade them to try it. Some of them are more enthusiastic than others. Cedric and Roger start showing up most mornings. Hermione? Not so much.

But mostly his friends race each other, because the obstacle course is more fun with magic. Harry thought he'd found a loophole, only casting spells on the equipment instead of at other champions, but Umbridge got wind of it and disabused him of the notion. Harry lost another day to detentions. He watches the rest of them let loose and burns with envy. He hopes Riddle's contacts pull their strings soon.

Harry doesn't want to be jealous. It is the only dark spot of otherwise brilliant mornings. They're good company. Krum is a quiet guy and slots into their existing dynamic seamlessly. There's something in his non-judgemental nature that is as welcoming as an extroverted Cedric, in its own way. Krum is easy to be yourself around.

Harry didn't set out to recruit Krum, but he's a good fighter and he respects the muggleborns, so Harry is not dismayed to realise one day that Krum is now one of them. Umbridge gets more flinty-eyed with each new addition to their alliance. Krum is just the beginning. He brings Ivankova with him, and Görder sticks like glue after her run in with Bellatrix. After overhearing Madam Maxime with Umbridge, Harry has been watching Fleur more closely – not the way he was before, as if she is was smoking cauldron ready to blow, but as a person. He sees her deal with unsolicited attention from men and jealousy from women, sees her alone with no one to stand beside her in support. He sees, the way he didn't before, that the attention makes her uncomfortable.

Day after day, it is the same perpetrators. Harry loses count of amount of flirting she brushes off, more irritated each time she is forced to repeat herself. It is a helpless kind of frustration, knowing the words won't work, but Delacour can't avoid them without skipping training entirely. Some days, it appears that is what she does. Harry would need a break, too. It looks exhausting and daunting. And he assumes this is *after* culling off many aspirants in the first week, leaving only the ones who don't know when to quit. They seem to get invigorated with each man who gives up, as if the reduction in competition means they have a better chance. There is no thought to whether Delacour wants to be with anyone at all, let alone one of them. None of them can conceive the possibility that their suit is unwelcome. If she tells them to leave her alone, she's playing hard to get, she'll come around.

Harry can't unsee it. His ears seem attune to pick out red flags in what was once background noise. Compliments break his concentration. Seeing her brush off their attempts to guide her through wand movements, the tone of their voices, the places their eyes linger, it makes his skin crawl. It's more distracting than the fear of Delacour's allure ever was.

It boils over in Healing. Harry has worked with Figg several times and he usually gives useful feedback, but he appears to think their Delacour can do no wrong, or she's here to be told she's perfect rather than how to improve.

She demonstrably isn't. "My spell was not the same colour as yours."

"It was a good effort," Figg says.

"Would it work or not?"

“Every little bit helps.”

Delacour grinds her teeth. “Why did it not work?”

“Well, the official method is more of a twist than a swish, but honestly, I like your way better. It is more elegant.”

Harry’s irritation rises as Delacour’s does. His patience snaps first. “Figg, show me how to deal with infection again. I’ve forgotten.”

Figg’s overly solicitous demeanour sours in an instant.

“Can’t you see we’re busy, Mr Potter?”

“No, it is quite alright,” Delacour says, and goes to Hopkirk instead.

…

The second time Harry steps in, Delacour gets suspicious. She jumps on the excuse but spends the rest of the lesson shooting furtive looks between Harry and the trainer, anticipating a jealous rage. She seems confused, and only more suspicious, at the lack of posturing. Harry is actually in a rather good temper – the grumpy strop the trainer falls into does wonders to buoy Harry’s mood back to pre-creeper levels. That alone would be enough reason to keep doing it.

It is not a perfect solution to her problem. Not even a good one, because once Umbridge is finished clearing up the fireworks, the combination of Delacour and Harry in the same room proves too tempting for Umbridge to resist. She is constantly tottering after them with the damn clipboard and tape measure, sending them out of training to change shirts or socks, or whenever the Blood Supremacists complain about the smell.

And if Görder is with them as well, oh boy. If anything, Umbridge seems to hate Görder most, and Harry doesn’t know why. Görder isn’t a muggleborn or part veela or as deliberately antagonistic as Harry, but she is the youngest, the shyest, and Harry shudders to think *that* could be why Umbridge targets her. Görder gets more detentions than anyone else and Harry is afraid of what happens in there. She looks so scared afterwards, and won’t say anything except that Umbridge had her doing lines.

Umbridge is a delicate problem, something for he and Hermione to discuss in private. But Delacour… Harry raises the problem at breakfast.

“Delacour is being harassed by some of the trainers. They constantly flirt and don’t listen when she tells them to piss off.”

Hermione straightens, a pillar of righteous fury. “They *what*.”

“Who?” Krum scowls.

“Figg in Healing and Sampson in Combat are the worst. But there are a dozen others with the odd comment – how good she looks today, staring, winking, that kind of thing – it adds up and it’s just ceaseless.”

Cedric looks two parts ill and three parts sympathetic and all parts angry. “That’s appalling.”

Krum mutters a fervent agreement in Bulgarian.

Roger frowns, thinking back. “I see it now. But Sampson – are you sure?”

“Moody runs interference, but he’s busy…” Harry trails off.

Hermione says, “I’ll tell Dumbledore–”

Harry shakes his head. “What can he do? Umbridge is in charge, and she doesn’t care.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” Roger asks, determined.

“Distract the trainers,” Cedric says, at about the same time the rest of them reach the same conclusion.

“I’ve been a buffer where I can,” Harry says. “It’s working.”

“Right. Straightforward enough,” Cedric says.

“It’ll stop the confrontations, perhaps,” Hermione says. “It won’t stop the stares or winks or general lechery.”

“It is like being famous,” Krum says. “When you have a public face, people think they own it, or are owed something by it. We were taught to deal with it in my first season in the League.” But they he tells them what they don’t want to hear. “You cannot make it stop, only manage the risks.”

“Damn,” Harry says. He vaguely remembers Krum spent a lot of the first week autographing things. Delacour can’t give them what they want so they’ll stop asking.

Krum nods seriously. “For this kind of attention especially, it is safer in groups.”

They look as one to the corner of the Ravenclaw table, where Delacour sits alone, as far from people as she can get.

Cedric grimaces. “I’m not sure that is an option.”

Harry still not sure what to make of Fleur. She hasn’t gotten any friendlier, for all Harry’s help, which doesn’t matter. Harry isn’t angling to make friends. He does want to sit with her at a meal or two, so she doesn’t have to be alone. He isn’t going to.

“I told her she’s welcome to eat with us, if she wants,” Harry says. “Let’s leave it at that.” She’s probably had enough of people deciding what she does and doesn’t want. If she gets lonely, she knows where to find them.

Chapter End Notes

> Heads up guys, I'm flying to Belgium for work/study for six weeks in May-July. In any free time I get, I'll be exploring the country, so I won't get much writing or editing done.
> I'm trying to get far enough ahead that you won't notice the difference, but there are a few gaps which will be roadblocks. I might manage it, we'll see.

Week 2 day five and six

Chapter Summary

> Harry and Hermione decide something needs to be done about Umbridge. Somehow Tom gets involved.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Roger is one of the few champions who isn't put off by Fleur Delacour's demeanour, and he hasn't held a grudge for snaring him with her allure at the Ball, either. But none of them, regardless of personal feelings, thinks the trainers' treatment of Delacour can continue unchecked. Roger takes to being a knight in shining armour with enthusiasm. For Cedric, it is his natural state. Hermione excels at being pushy, and Krum isn't afraid to muscle in with arms crossed. They excel at blocking the troublesome trainers, but they all fall short to Amelia. The trainers don't even try to escape when the little Hufflepuff's guileless eyes are set on them.

Delacour warms up to Krum first, perhaps because he talks the least. A few days into their scheme, and Delacour unbends enough to race him on the obstacle course. At the finish line there are no lingering looks, no comments about other activities which could get her heart racing, from anyone.

When, one evening, Delacour sits at their table, Harry feels like they've passed a test. She is pointedly out of range of easy conversation, and the alliance doesn't try to speak to her. It is progress. People notice.

"Right, it's our lunch break so clear out," Moody says. "Not you, Potter." Moody kicks out a chair, a dull thud of wood on wood. "Sit. We need to talk."

Harry takes the chair gingerly. It is a break from the pattern and surprises, where Moody is concerned, are rarely pleasant. "Sir?"

Moody summons another chair and slouches into it. Around them, the other trainers start repairing the damage and resetting the equipment.

"Quite an alliance you're making. You're collecting a lot of people."

“I’m not making an alliance,” Harry protests. It’s true. The only one they’ve talked about recruiting is Ganz and Harry hasn’t even approached her yet. The Hogwarts champions stick together because they know each other. Görder needed support. Krum pissed off Bellatrix which gives them a common enemy, but it’s nothing Harry did, and Ivankova just followed Krum.

“Then you’re making friends, which is worse.”

“No, that’s not the point,” Harry says. He was already friends with Cedric and Hermione, and Roger fits in, and he’d dare anyone to dislike Amelia or Görder, and Krum is a decent bloke. “We’re not trying to befriend or recruit Delacour. She’s being harassed, stepping in is the right thing to do.”

Harry glares at Sampson. The trainer is flushing a deep red. Embarrassment or shame, Harry can’t tell if he has the decency for either.

“Would’ve been smarter to let them distract Delacour and interfere with her training,” Moody says.

Sampson grimaces at that – sabotage wasn’t his intention, then.

“I’m not going to ignore something like that because it’s *convenient*,” Harry says hotly.

“Not a fair fight, aye?” Moody’s craggy face sags and he looks years older. He moves like his joints ache. “There is very little about death that is fair or decent. I’ve seen a lot of decent champions in my time, boy. The decent ones die.”

Moody leans forward. “Any one of those champions could carry the wand that kills you. Do not get attached. Do not keep them close. The closer they are, the more damage they can do.”

Harry glares at him. “It doesn’t have to be that way. A strong enough alliance could defeat the Blood Supremacists and survive.”

Moody’s eye whizzes around his head. He lowers his voice. “In the entire history of the games, the Supremacist alliance has only been defeated by an outsider a handful of times. There is a reason. *Think*, Potter. What outcome does the Ministry want?”

“A sole victor.”

“Precisely. These things follow a pattern – a *script*. Alliances are not supposed to make it to the end. The Blood Supremacists are tolerated because they can be relied upon to self-combust. They pack hunt the others, one by one, and then there’s a battle royale as a grand finale for the cup. Which means?”

“The Supremacists are supposed to be the strongest alliance.”

“Aye, and you’re not the first to think of using numbers to overpower them. It fails in every Games.”

“You’re saying the Ministry steps in.”

“Of course, they do. Used to getting things their way, aren’t they?” Moody says. “Big alliances are unstable. The Ministry just has to apply pressure.”

“Pressure,” Harry echoes. He’s noticed. Everything fun was locked away. The Ministry took their belongings, gave them uniforms – combat uniforms. Each time Harry looks at a champion he is reminded they are training to kill him. They are encouraged to train at a rate that could make even Hermione burn out, up to seven days a week. There is no curfew to ensure they sleep. They are frequently too tired to talk, and if they weren’t, there are rules against socialising and even music, for Merlin’s sake. “Don’t tell me Umbridge’s stupid decrees actually serve a greater purpose.”

“Aye, pressure,” Moody says meaningfully. “Sometimes a big alliance will last until the arena, but in there, they don’t last long. Think about it. It’s a reality show. The Ministry want it to be exciting and the gamemakers interfere to make it so. If there are lots of little alliances or lone champions, their attention is spread around. What do you think will happen if every target is in the same place? You will not get a moment of peace.”

“So what’s this, then?” Harry asks, gesturing between them. “A friendly warning?”

If it’s a warning, why kick the rest of the champions out? Why target Harry alone unless it’s a threat?

Harry’s wand is locked in its holster. If he needs to escape, he can transform, but that will take time and Moody is fast and nearby. Harry gets up, paces as if he’s restless. His steps carry him farther from Moody, past the window. He opens it, spends a moment making a show of enjoying the breeze.

Not the most subtle of moves. When Harry next looks at Moody, he hasn't moved, lounging further back in his chair. There is a distinct light of approval in his good eye.

"This is a warning. It's normal for the schools to cluster with familiar faces for the first few weeks. Collecting half of Durmstrang under your wing and starting in on Beauxbatons – that isn't normal. The Ministry won't like what you're doing."

"It's not *me*, it's–"

"It's you." Moody says bluntly. "You're the common link. So who do you think the Ministry will target when they want it to fall apart?"

Harry is silent.

Moody stands and shrugs. "You've got winning potential, Potter. You're a fighter, one of the best here. Bellatrix has trained longer, but she's reached her peak, she can't get much better. Knuckle down, work hard, and you'll surpass her skill. But you're soft and that might get you killed." The old trainer limps over to look out across the grounds. "You can do what you like, but make sure you understand the consequences."

Here, by the window where his face can't be seen by the omnioculars, his words say *don't,* but his expression says *do it*, a little hope buried under the resignation.

"I understand, sir," Harry says.

…

"Condescending… obsessive… ruined my schedule…" Hermione mutters, stepping through the portrait hole, reappearing for the first time in three hours. "Please tell me I was never as bad as Umbridge."

"Not even if you tried," Harry says, closing his transfiguration book. "What did she get you for?"

"Speaking out of turn."

"Is that a new decree?"

"No. But give it a week."

Harry sighs. She's probably right.

“But I had an idea,” Hermione says, a little twitchy. She has never handled being bored very well. Three hours looking at wallpaper would be akin to torture. “I’m going to the library, I’ll be back soon.”

“I could use a walk. I’ll come.”

“No. I’m not going back to detention for breaking the chaperone rule. We can’t be seen meeting, remember?”

Harry sinks back in his chair. “Right.”

“Do you have a galleon on you?”

“Huh? No,” Harry says.

“Shame,” Hermione says. “See you later.”

“Sure,” he blinks, bewildered, and she’s gone.

Has Hermione lost her marbles? Of course, he doesn’t have a galleon. They have nothing except the borrowed clothes and illegal Weasley products and their wands half the time. And ‘we can’t be seen meeting’ – that’s worded oddly. And ‘see you later’ – later as in tomorrow or does she want him to wait up for her?

Something clicks into place in a very tentative kind of way. A hunch at best.

Harry goes up to this room with his book and comes back with his scarf.

The auror watches him. “What?” Harry says, wrapping his scarf around his neck. “I could still use that walk.”

Harry takes a circuitous route, wandering the corridors, a bit nostalgic. It’s not as fun walking around the quiet castle at night without his invisibility cloak. He loses his trailing omniocular somewhere on the third floor, almost not entirely on purpose. He’s being boring enough that more don’t swarm to look for him.

When Harry is on the seventh floor he ducks in the Room of Requirement. He’s still not sure his hunch is right until Hermione looks up from her scholarly nest.

“You made it!” she sounds relieved.

“Just barely,” Harry says, rueful.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t think of anything else to say that wouldn’t also clue in the Ministry.”

“It worked,” Harry shrugs. “We should use the same code from now on. Something like, I bet you five galleons Trelawny is next prediction is going to have me beheaded.”

Hermione nods. “We can use numbers to indicate meeting time.”

“Good idea,” Harry says. Hermione doesn’t gamble, so they’ll never get signals crossed. He looks over the books. “Do you need my help? Otherwise, I’ll get more intel from Sirius.”

“Talk to Sirius,” Hermione waves him off. “I’m still working out if my idea is feasible.”

According to the Prophet, Umbridge is an angel who sees the truth no matter now well hidden, if fact, even if it looks like she’s completely wrong. Madame Maxime is dangerously unstable; Fleur Delacour is a harlot; Görder is a liar taking advantage of Amelia; and Bellatrix is making such clever use of Tom Riddle. As for Harry, apparently, he is deeply insecure and clingy with a history of foisting unwanted attachments on people. Hermione, for her part, is trying to seduce Krum or Cedric or Harry depending on the day of the week. So that’s a fun conversation.

At least the bastards have to work for it. The Ministry did a series of live interviews with classmates but stopped around the time Seamus said, “You angling for me to bag them out? I’ll do me best. Hermione used to be a bit uptight and Harry gets a lot of detentions but only from Snape. And they helped the whole bloody school pass Defence but me grade only got to Exceeds Expectations so maybe they could’ve tried harder; maybe set up open office hours or marked homework. Lazy sods.”

Now they only interview Malfoy and Parkinson. But word got around that the Slytherins are not the most unbiased source. There isn’t a kid at Hogwarts who doesn’t know about Harry’s feud with Malfoy. There isn’t a kid who didn’t get something out of the DA, either, and the Ministry might control the Prophet but they don’t bother with every harmless letter sent to mum and dad.

Maybe if Harry and Hermione were less well-known and respected; maybe if the Weasleys and Lovegoods weren’t running a counter campaign with an underground radio station and newspaper, then the Ministry could fling enough shit and it would stick. But they’re

starting to see some pushback. Unending fireworks and a portable swamp or two in Durmstrang and Beauxbatons and near the Ministry building. Childish pranks. Could be nothing, really, or it could be a spark.

“I’ve got it,” Hermione says.

Harry reads the text upside down. “What do you want with age lines?”

“To stick one in front of Umbridge’s door, of course. I will not spend another minute in that room. Look at this one. It creates an impassable barrier. The lines are, by design, very difficult to remove.”

Harry grins. “Hermione, you’re brilliant.”

“Yes, yes. I know. There’s a potion. It’s not too bad, we can get all the ingredients without too much trouble and it’ll only take a couple hours to brew. Pour the potion on the ground and cast this spell to activate it.”

Harry eyes the spell. It’s finicky, with a lot of particulars depending on the age bracket, which is much worse than requiring a lot of power. Especially with a wand that doesn’t like him. He wrinkles his nose. “I think I can manage with this wand. Better practice first.”

Hermione bites her lip. “If you get caught with that…”

Yeah. Would not be pretty. Worse, even, than if they’re caught loitering outside Umbridge’s office with a potion.

“I could take one of the Weasley fake wands, too. Try to a bit of sleight of hand if I’m caught. Then I’ll only be done for the foreign object decree.”

“Or both. I doubt they’d let get away without a search.”

Harry could unlock his holster and use his own wand, but even if that doesn’t set off an alert, if Umbridge thinks to check with Priori it’d be damning; it is such a specific spell that Harry would have no good excuse to have cast it.

“Maybe we can do it wandlessly,” Harry says dubiously.

“What’s the most complex spell you’ve managed?”

“Summoning spell,” Harry says.

Hermione shakes her head. “It’d take too long for you or I. But actually, I was thinking wandless magic is the best solution. If we bring in Tom.”

“I… don’t think I want to give him that much blackmail material.”

“Did you *see* him after his detention? He hates Umbridge as much as we do. I doubt he’d turn us in.”

“Riddle got a detention?”

“Yes, for inappropriate reading material.”

“Which is…?”

“Anything written by a vampire, apparently.”

“Merlin.” Harry considers how well Riddle tolerates being patronised. Then Harry wonders if Umbridge has considered that the training she is presiding over is for making them better at murder. “Okay, let’s say he’ll be on board. How do we set it up? There’s an auror stationed at her door.”

“Not when she’s in there.”

Harry hadn’t noticed that. “How long have you been planning this?”

“Since we figured out what she means by writing lines.”

Harry remembers the state of Görder’s hand. He clenches his fists. “What else can age lines do? Can they, say, turn someone between forty and fifty years old bright orange every time they cross it?”

“I don’t think so but you should tell Sirius so Fred and George can start developing it.”

…

Somehow it falls to Harry to get Riddle to the Room of Requirement. It is harder that it would’ve been a week ago. Not that Harry could’ve said it openly even then, with the way the omnioculars and portraits and trainers are always listening, but the new socialising decrees mean Harry can only talk to Riddle when there are other people around, and those people are invariably Blood Supremacists.

Harry is not going to walk up to them at breakfast. It would not end well. He thinks he could lure Riddle away during a lesson, though the

first problem presents itself when Harry doesn't see Riddle for the rest of the day. He knocks on Riddle's door before heading to bed, but there's no answer.

Luckily, Riddle is in the wilderness survival class when Harry enters after lunch the next day. It isn't the most useful class. Harry figures he'll have extracted the most important lessons out of the trainers by the end of the week. Replacing it with more transfiguration or warding lessons will be a better use of his time.

The basics are truly basic: summoning charms for food, water conjuring and warming charms are taught before OWLs. Tracking, though – that's new. There are many spells created by hunters and stalkers. Harry didn't know that magic could highlight traces like footprints, and now that he does, he needs to figure out how to counter it.

Once Harry and Riddle are in the same room, getting a minute to talk to him isn't difficult. Riddle is always open to talk to him, no matter how constipated it makes Bellatrix look.

He strikes up idle conversation and quickly steers it to the point. "Did you ever come to our DA meetings?" Harry asks, knowing the answer.

"Once or twice," Riddle says.

"Didn't you enjoy it?"

"You were teaching fourth years the stunning spell, at the time. It was a little below my level."

"Ah, you should've turned up on a weekend. There was duelling and a surprising amount of jumping out of trees. A little something for anyone, really."

Riddle raises an eyebrow.

"The twins kept us on our toes," Harry shrugs.

"Would you have duelled me, if I had?"

"Probably."

"Perhaps I did dismiss it too soon."

"We might start the meetings up again, after this," as in, right after this conversation. "You should come. We could use your help."

“As a teacher?”

No, that’s just what it’s suppose to sound like. Harry is about half certain Riddle has caught the hints and is just messing with him. “Something like that. We had specialists in all sorts of areas. Hermione and I couldn’t do everything alone, you know.”

“Sounds fun. I’ll be there,” Riddle says. “Of course, since the Games will be over and the rest of you will be dead, I’ll have to lead the DA in your honour.”

Now Harry’s certainty is hovering around the high nineties.

…

Riddle strolls in halfway through the brewing process. Hermione adds the frog eyes that Harry skimmed when Slughorn wasn’t paying attention. He never would’ve gotten that past Snape.

“Colour me intrigued. What is it you need my help with?”

“Tom, hello,” Hermione says. “We’re going to set an age line to stop Umbridge bringing champions into her office.”

“Quite a worthwhile endeavour. But you didn’t answer my question.”

Hermione huffs. “I’m getting there. Harry, take over,” Hermione points to the line in the recipe she’s up to and shows Riddle the other book. “This spell. Could you cast it wandlessly?”

“I could,” Riddle says without even having to think about it.

Well, that’s terrifying. Harry shivers.

Riddle spares him a brief grin and then returns to skimming the page. “So you will pour the potion in the doorway and then you want me to cast this spell. I suspect it would work from a distance. The other end of the corridor, certainly. Perhaps even without line of sight.”

That’s good to know. Harry feels a lot better about using the spare wand, if it comes to that.

“Then you’ll help?” Hermione asks. “We can do it without you but it’s riskier.”

“From my point of view, since you’re going to do it anyway, I should step back and reap the rewards with no risk to myself,” Riddle says.

“What would make it worth your while?” Harry asks. Riddle would be doing them a favour, so he doesn’t feel bad giving Riddle a blank cheque. Riddle can’t demand much more than his help is worth, which isn’t all that much. His silence is worth a lot more, but it’s also worth a lot to Riddle – he seems on board with the premise, if not with participation – so Harry is fairly sure he won’t tattle.

“You are not going to agree to duel me,” Riddle says.

“No.” Certainly not for a prank Harry could do himself.

“Then allow me the opportunity to convince you. Do you schedule any rest days?”

Harry’s eyebrows rocket to his hairline and he almost stirs the potion the wrong direction. “Sundays after lunch.”

“Meet me here tomorrow. Spend the afternoon, and I’ll do it.”

If it’s a straightforward as it sounds, it’s a weird request, which makes Harry certain there’s more to it. But it’s still one of the more interesting ways Harry can imagine spending his time off. Even if Riddle plans to convince him by hexing him. There really isn’t much to do around Hogwarts anymore.

“Okay,” he agrees.

Hermione looks between them and shakes herself. “We have an hour left on the potion. We can’t act straight away – Görder is in detention at the moment. It’s why she missed dinner, according to Amelia, so we could wait for her to be released and then set up the age line before Umbridge retires for the night and the guards return.”

…

While the potion steeps, Harry hands out a share of Peruvian instant darkness powder to Hermione and Riddle, just in case.

“Everyone clear on the plan?” Hermione asks.

“Yes,” Harry and Riddle agree.

Riddle wiggles his fingers and asks, “Ready?”

“Yeah,” Harry says.

Riddle flicks his fingers at Harry’s throat and then his feet. Harry

scuffs his shoes – it doesn't make a sound.

Riddle steps close. He runs his fingers through Harry's fringe. He has large hands. Harry swallows. Riddle taps a finger on top of Harry's head, and it feels like a raw egg being broken over him and running down his back.

Harry looks down at himself, dislodging Riddle's hand in the process. He looks like an excellent chameleon. They don't need to be entirely undetectable – if they're spotted, they just need to unidentifiable for long enough to run away. Harry can barely see his silhouette when he moves. It's textbook perfect.

"You've gotta be kidding," Harry mutters. His voice is unrecognisable, and with another flick, so is Hermione's.

Riddle's grin disappears into the background as he disillusions himself.

Hermione pats her pocket to check the potion is there and puts on the ring. She vanishes. Harry can't see or hear her at all, he can only trust that she's still behind them.

They sneak to Umbridge's office. There's a light under the door and the auror isn't there yet. Good. They can proceed.

Hermione will be staking out the door because she's proper invisible. Harry and Riddle are just around the corner. Harry keeps a hand on Riddle's shoulder so they don't clatter into each other, and they sit down under a distinct portrait that Hermione will use to find them later. It helps to stay out of eye level. People don't tend to pay as much attention to up or down.

He's pressed against Riddle on one side. He feels Riddle exhale and relax. Then they wait. The stone is unyielding and quickly uncomfortable. The cold slowly leaches from the stone through Harry's clothes.

A hand lands on Harry's knee. Harry jumps. The muscle-deep heat of a warming charm spreads from his knee to the rest of his body. Harry sags into it a little. He can picture Riddle's smirk perfectly.

The hand stays. Riddle isn't inclined to take it back and Harry isn't inclined to move it. It is strangely relaxing, for all that Harry is alert and sharp, focused on the plan and listening for people approaching.

Hermione taps on Harry's head. That's the signal Görder has left her

detention.

They wait another minute, just to be sure Umbridge is planning to continue working, then they get in position. Riddle stays in the corridor, while Harry and Hermione approach the door. Harry keeps a hand on Hermione's shoulder as she crouches and pours the potion, his other poised to cast. Contact is more important now than ever – if they need to run, they need to know exactly where they are, so they don't trip each other.

Hermione completes the line and taps Harry's ankle. She stands and they hurry back to Riddle. halfway, Harry banishes a packet of the instant darkness powder to the door. It bursts and shrouds the corridor in inky blackness. That's Riddle's cue, with the bonus of preventing the flare of the activation spell from alerting Umbridge.

Or, Harry thinks as he hears the creak of hinges, she may have magic detection wards that'll alert her anyway.

"What is the meaning of this? Lumos!" Not even a ray of light makes it through the darkness. "Revelio!"

It bounces off Riddle's shield charm, not that it'd do Umbridge much good if it hit, but the portraits could've gotten an eyeful. Hermione tenses, stuck between them with one hand holding onto Harry and the other on Riddle.

Harry reacts. He thrusts his palm out and summons any pink heals in the vicinity. Umbridge shrieks and there's a muffled thud. He pictures it clearly; the prone woman in the doorway – he banishes her back into the office, and jabs out a quick *cierro* and *colloportus.* Then Hermione tugs their hands and they run.

They spill into the Room of Requirement, laughing and panting. Harry's ears pop along with the muffling charm as the disillusionments also fade.

Hermione takes the ring off and flops onto a squishy couch, "Yes!"

Harry is buzzing. He drops down right beside her, almost bouncing her off. Hermione kicks him in the back. Harry jabs her in the shin and lays more comfortably over her knees.

Riddle leans over the back of the couch, eyes crinkling at the corners. "What did you do to Umbridge?"

“Why do you think I did something?” Harry asks with such unconvincing innocence that even he is appalled.

“Because I only disarmed her and hexed her blind. *Someone* knocked her over.”

“Maybe she walked into the wall,” Harry says. He doesn’t want Riddle to know that he can do fourth year charms, but maybe he can give Riddle enough to satisfy him. He sighs and admits, “I closed and locked the door.” They’re only first year level, and it’s easier to lie with the part truths.

“Did you,” Riddle says. Harry can’t tell if he’s convinced.

Harry is struck by an idea, and he grins. “I hope she’s locked on one side and her wand is on the other.”

Hermione snickers until she wears herself out. “Tom, could you please pass me the Thesis on Transmitigation? It’s on the table.”

Riddle holds it over Harry like he might drop it. Harry folds his hands behind his head. He’s had worse. But Harry’s ribs are safe. Riddle hands it to Hermione and sits on one of the armchairs with another tome.

Harry eyes him curiously. Riddle doesn’t strike him as the type to linger when social situations don’t serve a purpose. Harry silently activates the Weasley’s Wand Wailers. They’re tiny buttons that make an ungodly racket whenever magic is cast nearby (and at double volume for locator spells). Riddle won’t be able to try anything without Harry knowing about it.

“Not that I profess to be an expert on pranking, but it might be suspicious if we return to hide in our beds minutes after a crime,” Riddle says.

“Good point,” Hermione says. “I’ll read for a little while before heading back.”

Harry hums. “I’ll go outside.” He’ll crack open a window, fly around some and walk around the grounds for a while. The lake is nice in the moonlight. He closes his eyes. He doesn’t need to hurry. He can nap until Hermione leaves.

“Thank you for helping, Tom,” Hermione says, quieter. “That really was a brilliant bit of magic.”

“Quite a useful skill, isn’t it? Moreso if it is not general knowledge, so I would thank you to keep it to yourself,” Riddle says neutrally.

Hermione winces. “I’m sorry I threatened to tell on you. It was childish. I would never do such a thing now, Tom. I couldn’t, even back then. I knew I was wrong. I hope you know I didn’t carry through with it.”

“I know you didn’t. That is why I am still willing to speak to you.”

Harry falls asleep to uncomfortable silence.

…

A foot nudges his hip, pulling him back to awareness. “Harry.”

Harry blinks and stretches. “Tempus.” It’s 10:30PM. They shouldn’t stay up much longer. The Room produces a window. It’s cool, clear night. Good for flying. “Riddle’s gone, then?”

“Yes,” Hermione says, sadly.

Harry rubs her ankles, which somehow moved from under him onto his lap while he was sleeping. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Hermione shakes her head. “It’s an old argument. We’ve settled it.”

“Didn’t sound settled.”

“It’s as settled as it will ever be. Tom doesn’t trust easily, and he certainly doesn’t forget when that trust is broken.”

“He still seems to like you,” Harry encourages. “You were always talking about the things you did together over the holidays.”

“Not the first year after I blew it and he went to Hogwarts before I could fix it. He made new friends here and didn’t need me anymore,” Hermione swipes at her eyes. “It took a while but we’re friends again, now. Sort of. He used to share his secrets with me. I don’t think we’ll ever get back there.”

Harry rubs her ankle again. Hermione reaches down to squeeze his hand in thanks. They are silent for a minute. Harry is on the verge of falling back asleep.

“Harry… are you and Tom…?” she trails off.

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” Harry says eventually. “He wants to win, so nothing can come of it.”

It is a shame, that’s all. Working with Riddle was fun. They make a good team. He scrubs the at the hot, heavy feeling around his eyes. It’s a shame circumstances mean it can’t always be this way. In the arena, everything will change.

Harry shifts Hermione’s legs and gets up abruptly. He shakes himself. “Crack open a window in the common room for me? I'll see you tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

Apparently the elves have been serving respect-women juice.

Anyone hanging out for the romance is in for a treat because the next chapter is all Harry/Tom.

Week 2 day seven

Chapter Summary

> Just Harry and Tom chilling in the Room of Requirement, three feet apart because they both take Umbridge's rules very seriously.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The wall in the seventh-floor corridor is blank stone. Riddle must not be inside the Room yet. Harry isn't paying much attention when he requests a room; he just needs a place to meet Riddle. He's half expecting the same lab/lounge combo from the age line adventure. The other half is expecting something excessively red and gold because his subconscious can be a bit of an arse.

His subconscious also knows what it wants from Riddle, though, and apparently that is a fight. The spare wand is waiting for Harry on a shelf beside the door. He folds up his sleeves and tucks the wand in the cuffs, out of site but in easy reach, just in case.

The Room is set to one of the most challenging battlegrounds the DA used – the one with the most complexity and variety – Harry's favourite. It's only a couple hundred square metres but it's three layers deep. The middle layer is the ground: a steep forested hill with thick underbrush, excellent for ambushes, and towering trees whose roots stand as tall as Harry, and some of them cover holes into an underground warren of tunnels and chambers. Hermione was a *demon* in there. There are staircases spiralling around the largest trees, up to platforms and walkways and ladders further into the canopy. That's where Harry fought best, picking off people from above.

Harry treks up there now and considers if the reason he enjoyed it more than anyone else is because he flew and didn't have to climb the stairs. The view is still worth it. But it's too quiet, especially without the chaos of the DA. It's not a real forest. There's no birds or insects or wind. He's not used to quiet. He's not used to being alone, certainly not at school, but home was never empty either. Both his parents and Sirius were social people, and they loved music. Some record was always spinning upbeat tunes, unless Remus was around, then the house elves had standing instructions to switch it to slow classical to perpetuate a ten-year running gag that they don't like rock music.

Harry's still not sure if Remus is in on it.

The room is playing something now that Harry thinks is in Sirius's teenage rebellion collection. It makes Harry smile.

"Harry?"

"Up here."

Riddle doesn't hex him the moment he sees him. Harry crosses one of his expectations off his list.

It takes Riddle a minute to reach the platform.

"Are you trying to break all of the decrees at once?" Riddle's eyes dart to Harry's forearms, his untucked shirt, the concealed spare wand. "Unkempt appearance, illegal foreign object, music, an unchaperoned… encounter," Riddle trails off with a smirk. "If you want to complete the set, add a little sedition and reduce the distance between us, you'll hear no argument from me."

"Wasn't quite what I was going for," Harry blushes deep scarlet and tries to convince himself that doesn't sound like a good time. He grasps for a distraction, for his own sake. "Sedition. Really? You?"

"You might be surprised," is all he says.

Harry is dubious. The Blood Supremacists are an ideology as much as they are an alliance. Riddle must believe some of it, and probably not the anti-muggleborn parts. Riddle confirmed he wants to be a sole victor, which aligns with their anti-blood traitor views, but the Supremacists are a pro-Games and pro-Ministry above all else. If Riddle doesn't share that, Harry can't think of a reason for him to be one of them. It is far less convoluted to imagine Riddle is lying about his loyalties now.

Riddle just smiles and lets the statement pass uncontested, which, in Harry's limited experience, is not the way things usually go. His suspicion grows.

"What about the rules so big they're above decrees?" Riddle asks. "Magic outside of training or unsanctioned duels. Even if you're utter rubbish, it could be a lot of fun in this place."

Riddle starts poking around.

Harry follows. “I’m not that easily goaded.”

“You still want to fight me,” Riddle says. It isn’t a question. They cross a rope bridge to one of the tree forts. “You only need a good reason.”

Harry did agree to hear him out. “Go on, then.”

“You’re trying to hide your strengths from me, which is pointless. The rumour mill is fully functional in Slytherin. I know you’re a good duellist. You cast a patronus in your third year. I know what you’re capable of.”

“Knowing and experiencing are very different things,” Harry says. “Or you wouldn’t pester me so much.”

“Touché.”

Riddle pauses at a ladder. It goes above the canopy, to a lookout that they can barely see from here. It seems Riddle is wondering if it is worth going up there. It is.

“Come back here at sunset,” Harry says.

Riddle nods and heads down the stairs to explore the forest floor. “Duelling other champions is useful practice. It would be particularly good for you. You’re a fast learner.”

“I can practice against my mentors and the trainers.”

“They won’t be the ones you’ll face in the arena. They are training you to fight the champions – better to cut out the middleman. Champions tend to fight differently to professionals. They have less experience and more motivation.”

“I can get enough information from watching your matches.”

“But nothing tops practical experience. Umbridge is not doing you a favour, banning you, and she’s not just inconveniencing you either. She wants to hurt you. She knows it is in your best interest to duel other champions.”

“Has Crouch had any luck repealing my ban, yet?”

“No,” Riddle scowls. “The Minister himself supports Umbridge’s restrictions.”

Harry blinks. “The fuck did I do to piss off *him*?” He hasn’t even run

his mouth about corruption or dictatorships. It can't be because of the pranks. If the Ministry had the slightest inkling who was involved, Umbridge would make them pay for it. Maybe Moody was right. Unless the Ministry has another, unknown reason to disapprove of him enough to want him dead. Perhaps his parents? It's the only thing he can think of which set Harry apart from the other halfbloods and muggleborns. He has long suspected the zealots that killed them had an agenda or orders. If the Ministry want to kill him too, they'll have plenty of opportunities to arrange it.

It is strangely reassuring for the Ministry to acknowledge he's a lost cause. They have to kill him because he's not going to become one of their perfect champions. He's still Harry.

"Have you given up on Umbridge, then?" Harry wonders.

"I do not give up," Riddle says. "I will admit the most obvious avenues are dead ends, but everyone has a weakness, and I will find it."

His determination leaves no doubt. Harry hums, appreciative, before he catches himself.

"Stupid rules deserve to be broken," Riddle says. "We can have a clandestine duel. I can unlock your holster. There's nothing stopping us."

"There are no alarms on the holsters?"

"No. They did not make contingencies for wandless magic. An arrogant oversight."

Well, that's good to know.

Riddle pauses at a dark, gaping tunnel. It's like the entrance to the Shrieking Shack – earthy, and usually too low to stand comfortably. He raises his eyebrows at Harry.

Harry grins. "It really is a shame you never joined the DA. Even if I duel you, and give it my all, you still wouldn't experience this battleground's full potential. It's much better with more people." Harry points out the tunnel at the next tree, and another. "A team with good enough spatial awareness to navigate the tunnel maze can pop up wherever they want, attack and dart back underground. It's like whack-a-mole, except the moles surround you and hit back."

Harry leads the way. He flicks the borrowed wand in a dim lumos,

and it takes conscious effort not to cast it wandlessly out of habit. It prickles his instincts, these days, to use lumos at all while sneaking around. The spell broadcasts your position– a lesson driven painfully home by fighting in these very tunnels. A night vision charm is much better, so long as you take your opponents out before they switch on the lights and blind you.

“You shouldn’t turn your back on me. It has crossed my mind, that if you don’t have a reason to fight me, I could *make* one,” Riddle says lowly. Harry shivers.

“The possibility had crossed my mind,” Harry says. He doesn’t turn around. It doesn’t matter if he sees an attack coming or not, since he’s not going to fight back.

A stinging spell hits him right between the shoulder blades.

“Ow!” Harry shoots Riddle a dirty look. Riddle has the cheek to grin. Harry aims the wand awkwardly over his shoulder to heal the sting. “Yes, I have contingencies. No, they’re not shield enchantments.”

Harry hopes Riddle won’t to test his contingencies, because there’s several hours until Dobby will check on him, if Harry is unable to call for a rescue, and Harry has no desire to pass the time enduring whatever Riddle will persuade him. Or to play damsel in distress for Hermione, McGonagall and Snape. Ideally, Snape will never find out he’s doing something so reckless.

When a stunning spell doesn’t immediately follow the threat, Harry carries on, taking a left and then a right, and then jumping into smaller tunnel that cross above them.

“How many stings would it take for you to fight back?” Riddle muses. “Most people can survive at least a thousand.”

Harry snorts. Riddle has tried that route already. “I hate Bellatrix more than anyone. I still let her threaten my best friend, kick me down, give me a concussion, break my wrists, and humiliate me in front almost everyone on Earth. Stings are a bit tame, don’t you think?”

Harry ducks under a root and crawls through a narrow passage. He drops into a larger cavern, swinging so he doesn’t land in the pit the twins dug out below. It’s empty of alligators this time, at least.

He lands in a room they call the bunker. Once the twins and Hermione

took this spot, they were impossible to pry out. No one ever got inside without getting drenched in paint. They were too good with traps and the tunnels are perfect for it. Capture the flag was the *worst*.

There's a large orange and purple 'W' on the flattest wall. Harry turns it bright green and hopes that one day the twins will scratch their heads over it.

"I could keep you here until you agree to fight me," Riddle says, dropping quietly down behind him.

Harry leans against a wall, twirling the wand in his hands. The light clinging to the tip throws dramatic shadows. Riddle flickers in and out of view.

"I'd remember to feed you. Probably. But time is all you have left. You wouldn't get much training done. You'd spend your last days alone, instead of with your friends." Riddle stalks closer. He only has eyes for Harry, not the heavily enchanted and booby-trapped bunker; the box of puzzles Harry knows is right up Riddle's alley, and hoped would be a distraction. "This room can become anything. What if I wanted a cell where no one would ever find you?"

Riddle has him pinned in a corner. Harry glares at him defiantly. "I certainly won't fight to stop you."

"You don't think I could pull it off, I suppose. You think you'd escape," Riddle tilts his head. His breath brushes over Harry's cheeks. "I wager you're relying on your elf friend. Dobby, wasn't it?" Harry's breath catches. Riddle notices, and he smirks. "The free elf. It means he's not bound by the same orders as the others. He could probably attack me. He could certainly try to free you. He's very loyal to you, I imagine. But there are ways around his skills."

Riddle is close. Dobby would be his ace, and Harry is kicking himself that he introduced them. But Harry isn't helpless. He's a particularly tiny animagus and Riddle doesn't know it. There won't be many cages that can hold him. If he couldn't escape, he probably would fight Riddle to get out. Maybe not the first day, but soon the disadvantage of revealing his cards would be outweighed by missing training. Harry isn't about to admit it, though, or Riddle might think it's worth a shot.

A hand darts out and closes around Harry's wrist. Riddle pulls the wand up, into his own chest. "Go on, stop me." The light vanishes into the fabric. It's just skin on skin in the dark. Riddle leans closer – Harry can feel it in the pressure on his arm. "Unless… you don't want me to

stop?"

Harry catches a flash of his teeth in the muted light.

"Is that why you're holding out on me? You think I'll duel you, get what I want, and never look at you again? You don't have to worry about that. There's something about you. It's intriguing, and the more I learn the worse it gets."

Harry breathes out against the great weight of his frozen muscles. "I know what you're doing." The second breath is easier, less lightheaded.

"Oh?" Riddle practically sighs into his ear, the little shit. He's grinning wider now, caught out and not sorry in the least.

"Trying to seduce me into a fight," Harry drags his hands down his face. "Gotta say, that's a first."

Harry pushes Riddle's shoulder. Recognising his proximity is no longer welcome, Riddle takes a step back. A moment later he appears to give up the gambit entirely – the artifice slides right off him. He relaxes into his usual, only slightly less predatory stance. His expression suggests Harry has just done something unexpected. Riddle doesn't look put-off by it.

"I know you're attracted to me," Riddle says, poking at Harry again to see if anything will chip off which he might decipher.

"Yeah, what of it?"

"People are usually more susceptible to suggestions in such situations."

"Those situations don't usually occur during a murder tournament, though."

Riddle pauses. "I suppose," he says slowly, "such circumstances could conceivably influence a person's decisions."

He gets wordy when he's flustered. Harry grins. "I'm even less inclined to kiss you than I am to duel you."

"Which means you want to do both," Riddle mutters, sounding certain if a bit perplexed.

He isn't entirely correct, but close enough. Harry shrugs. He can't

control his feelings, but he can control how he acts on them. Duelling might be fun now, but it's not worth it in the long run. If he gives into the seduction, he might end up falling for Riddle and that would be a *disaster*. Harry already struggles to imagine Riddle dying without feeling sick, and he only thinks Riddle is incredible and attractive and terrifying.

"You may have had more success with the seductive angle before you tried to scare the wits out of me."

"No, I wouldn't have," Riddle says knowingly. He finally decides to just ask outright, "Will you duel me?"

"No," Harry says.

"Okay," Riddle says. "What shall we do now, then?"

Harry spreads his arms. "I brought you here for a reason."

Riddle moves to examine one of the doors out of the bunker. It doesn't budge. "Do we have to go back out the same way we came in?"

"Probably," Harry says. It'll be a bit of a jump to reach that tunnel. "The Weasley twins sealed all other passages so they can only be opened by password. We only ever figured out one, and it was the last twenty items on the caretakers banned items list in reverse alphabetical order."

"How in the world was cracking that password easier than curse-breaking your way through?"

"Bribery. Getting the password was the easy part. Memorising it was the trick."

"Ah," Riddle says, then, "Mind if I have a go?"

Harry hands Riddle the wand. Riddle stares at him for a moment. Then he spins away, shaking his head. "If I didn't know weren't an idiot…"

Harry moves closer. He watches Riddle cast a few diagnostic charms, and soon after he's out of his depth.

The door holds Riddle's attention for almost an hour. Riddle enjoys himself as much as Harry thought he would. Harry tries to follow his techniques and thought processes, but often loses track when a deft

move of Riddle's hands catches his eye.

Riddle adds one last line to his runic circle. It flares blue and sinks into the door. The lock clicks. Riddle looks incredibly pleased with himself. "After you."

Harry leads the way out. They were in the tunnels longer than he'd realised and the forest is getting dark.

"Come on, we're gonna miss it," Harry says. He weaves through the trees, aiming for the closest one to the lookout. He climbs the stairs two at a time and jumps the gap to the next platform – something, Harry is amused to note, that Riddle isn't too keen on.

Harry waits to see Riddle make it across, then he hurries up the ladder. He smacks branches out of his face until he breaches the canopy, and that is where the lookout usually stops. At Harry's urging, the Room extends the ladder as far as it can go. The ladder embeds itself in the ceiling, though it's hard to tell because the Room was inspired by the Great Hall and the ceiling looks like the sky.

Harry keeps climbing. By the top, his legs are burning. The lookout is a circular platform among the rafters. There's barely room to stand.

"Alright, Riddle?" Harry calls. He moves out of the way, sitting with his legs dangling over the edge, slouching over the railing.

"Fine," comes the terse reply. Riddle appears through the hole. His eyes are focused on the ladder in his white-knuckled grip.

Harry grins. "You looked around, yet?"

Hearing the laughter in his voice, Riddle glares at him between the rungs. Then his gaze goes past Harry and his jaw drops.

The illusion is designed to be viewed from the ground. Now that they're right amongst it, it looks very different. The horizon is far below them. The canopy looks like rolling green hills. They're surrounded by fluffy clouds that appear far away when viewed from the ground, but up close they're just tiny. Harry tries to bat one at Riddle, but it turns into swirling mist.

If Harry couldn't touch the ceiling, he wouldn't believe it was there. Above them, the sky seems to continue for miles, up to wispy clouds that are slowly turning pink as the sun sinks down the far wall. Harry feels like he's hovering on his broom, thousands of miles higher than

it is possible to go.

Riddle sits next to Harry and stares. The sky turns yellow, red, purple. The clouds pepper the sky with colour and shadows. It slowly fades to deep blue. Fog creeps up, burying the trees and the rest of the world under a grey blanket and it suddenly feels like they're miles above the ground.

The planets come out first. Venus, near the horizon, along with Saturn and Jupiter in a row along the ecliptic. Then, the stars; points of light on the ceiling, down the walls, hanging in the air all around them. The milky way spans the room like a rainbow.

It's spectacular, no matter how many times Harry sees it. What Harry hasn't seen is this look on Riddle's face – Harry doesn't know what to call it, but it's funny. He thinks Riddle has stopped breathing once or twice. Harry finds it difficult to look away.

"We're like gods, up here." Riddle stands slowly and turns. "Polaris. Merak. Rigel," Riddle says, orienting himself. Harry follows his gaze. Rigel is over the centre of the Room. Harry can just make out the Orion nebula. "Thuban," Riddle points to a nearby binary system. That constellation is Draco, then. Not Harry's favourite. Riddle traces its path, then cradles an orange star in his palm, "Which means this is Eltanin." Riddle crosses the platform, one hand anchored to the railing, to another pair of binary stars orbiting each other. "And there is Unukalhai."

So Draco is on Riddle's left and Serpens is on his right. Hercules should be between them, but it's hard to tell. The constellations only look correct from the ground. Up here, the stars are at the wrong angles and half of them look miles away beyond the ceiling while others are right in front of them.

Harry doesn't know how Riddle can see the patterns. Harry goes to stand beside him, but it's no clearer from there. "Wait, is the tail curving up there or…?"

Riddle waves his hand. A nearby cloud responds to his will, stretching into the shape of a snake. It slithers into place and holds still a moment. Unukalhai glows in its heart. It flicks its tongue once before relaxing back into fog.

"Neat trick," Harry says.

Riddle grins at him, brighter than the stars.

Chapter End Notes

Alright guys, let's play find the foreshadowing. If you spot the hint you win a cookie. If you also figure it out you get the whole box.

Harry: Really, Riddle, you're trying to seduce me for a duel. Is it not beneath you?
Riddle: I could be beneath you. *snickers*
Harry: *snickers back*
Because they're both awful.

Also, I'm not saying that canon!Voldemort learnt to fly without a broom because he's afraid of heights and don't trust no flimsy stick, but I'm not not saying that.

Week 3 day one and two

Chapter Summary

Dumbledore is up to something.

Chapter Notes

I think we've got the idea about training by now. Harry is on track to becoming a badass, right? Right. We'll cover the rest of training much faster, popping in now and then to check on character development to see if Tom is still a bastard and see if Umbridge is still trying to muscle in on the plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry and Riddle have to return to the real world eventually.

Umbridge was spitting mad when the age line stopped her punishing champions while she works. Delacour was the lucky champion who got a front row seat to the meltdown, and she shared the grizzly details over lunch, wearing the first smile Harry has seen on her face. It made Roger blink a bit dazedly, but he kept his head.

Outraged by the sheer audacity of the prank, Umbridge dismissed Delacour and spent the rest of the weekend hunting for the perpetrators. She lined the champions up in the Great Hall and cast *priori incantatem* one by one, checking their recent spells.

Umbridge spent long minutes on Harry's wand, checking several days of spellcasting. He would appear to be suspect number one. Harry maintained a bored, vacant smile as her frustration rose. She checked a second time before admitting defeat and turned to give Hermione the same treatment. When Umbridge gets to Riddle, his expression turns so obnoxiously innocent, Harry has to bite his cheek to stop laughing.

When the very specific and damning spell wasn't found on anyone's wand, Umbridge changed tracks from finding someone to blame to demanding someone fix it. Harry would wish her luck, but age lines are designed to be fiendishly difficult to remove. And if she moves somewhere else, well. Harry and Hermione brewed a large batch of the potion and Harry isn't against selling out to Riddle for his help again.

…

Trelawny is scared of black cats and the number thirteen. She avoids the ladders in the library and knocks on wood at least a dozen times a day. She decides what to study by opening books to a random page and claiming providence. She keeps putting out the fire in the common room so she can watch the smoke patterns and leaving everyone in the dark. Those quirks would be easily ignored, if Trelawny was otherwise pleasant to be around, but it is impossible to hold a conversation with her. She does not ask questions; she declares she knows better. Or if she doesn't think she knows, she demands access to teacups, dreams or palms so she can find out.

Most of the champions do not tolerating being grabbed for an unsolicited prediction. Delacour is the exception.

Harry is braced for a tirade when Trelawny reaches for Delacour's hand. Delacour placidly lets her manipulate the fingers, press into the creeses, and turn her palm over.

"You have a long life line," Trelawny says. "Many branches– many possibilities or progeny? It is hard to say."

"My lines have not changed for many years," Fleur says.

Trelawny looks up.

"My little sister does this for me," Fleur says. "Full veela have different lines, but part-veela, we have these for out ambitions, see, instead of head lines."

"Oh, yes! Fascinating. Is it the influence of air or fire?"

"Primal fire," Delacour says, and then they're off.

The rest of the table share a collective shrug, largely of relief. No one is sure what to do with Trelawny. She does not garner much sympathy, and since an accident in the first week where Hermione was quick to quip "I guess she didn't see that coming" after Trelawny took a hit in training, her predictions have become a running joke.

That sort of heckling might not be tolerated any longer, Harry muses, eyeing the protective way Delacour angles her body.

But Delacour isn't always around, whereas Trelawny is *always* too mouthy for her own good.

“Stop!” Trelawny shouts, startling everyone in the potions room. Harry almost drops his stirring rod into his cauldron, and in lunging automatically to catch it, nearly dunks his fingers. Thank Merlin he didn’t – he’d hate to have to grow them back. He glares at Trelawny along with everyone else.

“You can’t go in there,” Trelawny tells Bellatrix, of all people, poised at the storage cupboard. “Twelve have already been inside. Something dire is sure to happen to the next person who crosses the threshold.”

Why would Trelawny *stop* her, then?

Bellatrix shoots Trelawny a filthy look. “Oh, shut up. Your stupid little superstitions don’t scare me.”

Bellatrix flings the door open. It slams into the wall with a resounding clang and sets the jars rattling into one another. Bellatrix steps in to get her next ingredient, just as a tall vial on the back of the top shelf topples into another, and another, and half the shelf rains down on Bellatrix’s head.

Harry stares unblinking so he will be able to recall every moment when he summons a patronus later.

“Oh, dear,” Slughorn says faintly.

Bellatrix’s hair is plastered to her face in lanky locks with green embalming fluid. As she slowly turns around, a large blue liver slides down her back and lands on her foot with a *shlorp*. The ingredients that don’t mix well are sizzling ominously. A pearly white powder falls slower than the rest, dusting everything.

“*You*!” Bellatrix hisses, taking a threatening step toward Trelawny and popping a giant leach under her heel. She goes for her holster, tries to brush off the eyeballs but only managing to transfer them onto her hand instead. The embalming fluid seems to be reacting with the powder and congealing into glue. “You set this up!”

Now would be a good time to run, but Trelawny says, “I told you so!”

Harry winces. He looks to Slughorn to get this under control, but the trainer is busy wringing his hands.

“I’ll kill you!” Bellatrix shrieks and hurls the handful of eyeballs at Trelawny – or tries. They are now thoroughly stuck.

Harry steps between them. “She didn’t do it, Bella.”

Her deranged gaze locks onto him and she bares her teeth. They’re green – the fluid made it into her mouth – oh, *gross*.

“Of course, you had something to do with it, Potter!”

“I suggest you go to the hospital wing. Don’t you agree, sir?”

“Hmm?” It takes a moment for Slughorn to realise that’s him, but he grabs for the plan with relief. “Oh, yes, quite right! You must go immediately, Miss Black, before it sets completely.” Slughorn pats his sweaty brow and finally gets around to directing his trainers. “Quickly, Madam Goulding, escort Miss Black. Master Blake, take inventory and send a report to Madam Pomfrey posthaste.”

Bellatrix growls off their help and lunges for Trelawny, only to almost face plant as her shoes remain stuck to the floor. She catches herself on hands and knees, and once she’s peeled those back off, she heaves at her leg and manages a large, lumbering stride.

“You know what,” Harry reaches blindly behind him and catches Trelawny’s shoulder. “We’re going to get Pomfrey to come to you.”

…

Harry looks both ways before leaving the secret passage. Bellatrix was released from the hospital wing an hour ago and he is not going to risk being caught alone in the corridors.

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry jumps clear off the ground.

“Professor Dumbledore!” Harry says, clutching his chest.

Dumbledore is standing beside the entrance as if he’d always been there. He is alone, which is a surprise, as the last Harry saw, Trelawny was hiding in her mentor’s shadow, which was the most sensible thing she’d done all day. Perhaps it is no great shock for her to revert to form.

“How are you, my boy?”

“I’m fine, sir.”

“And this day is particularly fine, as well. Will you walk with me? I

find myself eager to enjoy the rare sunshine. One never knows when one will next get the opportunity, at this time of year."

"Yes, sir," Harry says.

Dumbledore walks briskly towards the lake. He slows only to enjoy the autumn landscape. "You are in a very difficult situation. You do not need to be fine. There is no shame in that."

Harry feels a twinge of annoyance, because some of his difficulties must be Dumbledore's fault. The headmaster is the only person who hasn't given up on Snape and Harry having a relationship ever remotely approaching functional. But the mentors have been assigned and 'what ifs' are a waste of time, so he pushes the annoyance aside.

"I really am okay. The situation isn't okay or fair or pleasant, but there's nothing I can do about what happened. I'm focusing on the things I can change – training, sponsors, alliances. I can still see a way through this. So I am fine. I'm coping."

"I am sorry this happened to you."

"It had to happen to someone."

"Yes, and no," Dumbledore says. "Our world requires sacrifice, but it does not specify who must pay the price. The powerful have pushed that burden on the weak, and that is not a popular decision. There are even those who fight it."

Harry casts a wary look over his shoulder at the omnioculars.

Dumbledore hums. "Ah, to anyone listening, we are conversing about the weather, the flora and our favourite sweets."

Sounds about right for a conversation with the headmaster, to be honest. "The benefits of being eccentric," Harry says.

Dumbledore winks. "One can get away with rather a lot." Outwardly, his jovial demeanour doesn't change. "You are not alone, Harry. There is more going on than you realise. The Ministry does not have the absolute control over society that it once did. The people are disillusioned, and they're waiting for an opportunity."

"Sir," Harry says slowly. His inner Hermione is shrieking that there is Subtext here that he's missing. "Why are you telling me this?"

Dumbledore hums in answer. “I have spoken to Severus. You are making progress. You have the means to protect secrets and I trust you to do so.”

“That answers ‘why now?’.” It isn’t the question Harry asked.

“Indeed, why now!” Dumbledore twinkles at him, deliberately obtuse. “I sense we are approaching that critical moment. Tyrants fear the people they oppress. The harder they squeeze, trying to hold onto power, the more enemies they create. It is only a matter of time before someone says no more. A spark, igniting life like a phoenix.”

Phoenix. That jolts Harry’s memory. He’s heard whispers of a rebel group. Is Dumbledore *recruiting* him? To do what? Harry is staring.

Dumbledore gestures grandly. “Look, there. We have some late blooming thistles this year.”

Harry shakes himself. He knows that futility of trying to get more information out of Dumbledore than he wants to give. He’ll settle for what he can get. “So. Occlumency. Then you’re worried about someone finding out. Is it Snape?”

“Not at all, my boy. Severus has no love for the Ministry,” Dumbledore chuckles. “But he is not the only legilimens in Britain, and legilimency is not the only way magic can extract secrets.”

Harry tilts his head. He recalls Hermione saying something about occlumency increasing resistance to truth serums. He’ll need to look up the technique if that’s what Dumbledore is warning him about. It would help if Dumbledore could speak plainly.

Harry stamps down on the impatience. He must look calm for the cameras. They’re not talking about anything heavier than flowers, after all. “Is there someone specific I need to worry about?”

“Not to my considerable knowledge. All aurors learn basic legilimency, but none are as proficient as Severus. His skill is quite rare. If you can fend him off even slightly, they will give you no trouble at all.”

Harry had better look up those truth serums, then. He’ll not survive the Games just to be tried for treason.

“Can I tell Hermione?”

“Oh, certainly, but let it go no further. Not Mr Diggory, for instance – outstanding moral fibre he may have, but a father’s love can move men to share news they otherwise wouldn’t. And Harry,” Dumbledore’s eyes bore into his. “I would not trust Mr Riddle with this information.”

“No,” Harry agrees. Riddle is the kind to keep secrets when convenient for him, all else is blackmail and leverage.

Dumbledore stoops to pick up a button that looks like it might’ve escaped from the Transfiguration classroom. He turns it over a few times, humming to himself. “I also want to thank you, Harry. Miss Trelawny tells me you did her a good turn.”

“Of course, sir,” Harry blinks. He wouldn’t just let Bellatrix skewer someone. “It was no trouble.”

“Oh, but I think it was,” Dumbledore eyes him. “Standing up to injustice is often done at a cost to ourselves.”

Harry shrugs. It will hardly change Bellatrix’s attitude toward him. She will just add the grievance to her list.

“I know it was no particular fondness for Miss Trelawny that moved you to interfere.”

“Er,” Harry doesn’t want to badmouth Dumbledore’s champion, but he doesn’t have many nice things to say about her.

“You have a kind heart. It is a rare thing. Rarer still to maintain in dire circumstances,” Dumbledore smiles. “I admire it. You are a powerful wizard. You could be as dangerous as Miss Black or Mr Riddle if you chose. But you choose to be compassionate, and it is our choices that reveal who we are.”

…

Dumbledore gave Harry a lot to think about. Harry and Hermione pool their knowledge, but it still leaves them with far more questions than answers, and most of those from rumours. The Order is a rebel group that opposes Minister Grindelwald’s dictatorship. Dumbledore is involved and he is probably a leader because Harry can’t picture him following anyone else. The Ministry deny it exists, but anyone caught mentioning it gets a trip to the interrogators or Azkaban. If there is a story in the prophet about an unlucky gas explosion that led to political prisoners escaping custody, and a bounty for their recapture,

it means the Order had something to do with it. But Dumbledore didn't tell him their mission or ask him to join. Harry wonders why he brought it up at all. There must be a reason. It is too dangerous a subject to bandy about lightly.

So Harry thinks about compassion instead. Harry can't turn it off and he doesn't want to. He is getting heartily sick of people telling him he should. The trainers say compassion is dangerous and it makes him weak, and maybe relying on other people does make him vulnerable, but cooperation also makes a group stronger. Maybe there is even some truth to the danger, because the Ministry appear to be working very hard to make it so – why else would they pit them against each other from the very beginning, than to turn all their hate and fear on each other instead of the institution that deserves it?

Moody said the Ministry retaliate against alliances, but Harry is sure that if enough champions worked together, they could be strong enough to fight off anything the Ministry sends their way, even a dragon.

Harry is accidentally off to a good start. Krum and Delacour are among the best fighters, but they are not *the* best. Riddle and Bellatrix are off the table. They need Ganz. Ganz and her housemate Penchev are still attached at the hip, and if she brings him with her, all the better.

Harry approaches Ganz after they finish transfiguration lesson. Harry didn't hold back today, and he knows he caught her attention when he successfully turned a chess piece into a large statue and then into a knight.

"Can I speak to you?" Harry asks.

Ganz is tiny. Part of her success if duelling must be the difficulty in hitting such a small target. "Yes. What do you want?"

Harry is more accustomed to how bluntly the Durmstrang students speak since meeting Krum. Ganz doesn't seem as open as Krum, but might share his appreciation of getting to the point quickly.

"Are you open to an alliance?" Harry asks.

Ganz looks at Penchev. "Both of us?"

"Yes."

“With you – and who else?”

“The group I eat with.”

Her eyebrows rise. “All of them? Even the young ones?”

Meaning Amelia, Görder and Trelawny. Harry tries not to bristle. Ganz might not mean anything by it.

“Yes, anyone is welcome.”

“That is a lot of people,” Ganz frowns. Then the expression deepens, “Half of them are purebloods.”

Harry blinks. He wonders what she’s on about, because Amelia, Cedric, Roger and Krum aren’t the worst sort of purebloods. “I guess?”

“Whenever purebloods are around, they get all the credit for good things and we get the blame for bad things,” she says.

Which, if Harry is honest, doesn’t explain much. He hazards a guess, “You… don’t want purebloods to overshadow you?”

“Us,” Ganz nods gesturing first at Penchev, still silent support at her side, and then at Harry. “It must annoy you too.”

Harry has never noticed. “I don’t think halfbloods had the same problem at Hogwarts,” Harry says. “Mainly the muggleborns got the brunt of the prejudice.”

Ganz tilts her head thoughtfully. “There are no muggleborns at Durmstrang. Maybe is worse for halfbloods there. Wherever they are, the purebloods need to feel superior to someone.” She shakes her head, “I will prove in these Games that halfbloods are no less than purebloods.”

“Is that a yes or no on the alliance?” Harry asks.

Ganz exchanges a look with Penchev, who nods slightly. “Maybe. We will think about it and talk with our mentors.”

It’s less than Harry hoped for, more than he feared. It’s a start. Anything above an outright refusal is open to negotiation.

…

Harry is freshly showered and stripped down to his boxers, applying

muscle relaxants and bruise salve so he'll be able to move tomorrow. He thinks he's getting a little more toned, but it's hard to tell. At the very least, he needs less salve than he did a few weeks ago, which he'll call progress.

A sudden pop makes Harry throw the jar at the threat before his eyes register who is in front of him.

"Shit, Dobby! Are you alright?" The elf has the jar hovering in front of an outstretched hand. Harry sighs, "Sorry, you startled me."

"It is no problem, Harry Potter sir. Dobby has had worse things thrown at him."

Harry winces. "Maybe so, but I don't want to be one of those people. Warn me next time?"

Dobby nods, flapping his huge ears. "Dobby will, sir."

The elf scampers forward and hops onto the bed so he can whisper into Harry's ear. "Your Riddles is wanting Dobby to pass a message. Your Riddles is being in the Come and Go Room, sir. He is waiting for you."

"Oh," Harry blinks. "Thanks, Dobby."

The messenger is unexpected; it seems more Riddle's style to drag someone into a dark corner when he wants a private word. But the more Harry thinks about it, the more he feels he should've expected *something*.

It didn't occur to Harry earlier to wonder what Riddle would think of Harry trying to recruit Ganz. He didn't consider it might be a tad provocative to do the exact thing he knows Riddle doesn't want him to do. Harry had sort of forgotten it was the mere possibility of allying with Ganz which had kickstarted Riddle's determination to duel in the first place.

Riddle has been relatively amicable about Harry's defiance so far, taken it as a challenge instead of a threat, but refusing to duel, refusing to do something Riddle wants is different to actively doing something Riddle *doesn't* want. Riddle could be angry – he certainly was when Umbridge thwarting his plans. Going to meet him could be very stupid, but if Harry ignores him, the problem won't go away, and Riddle will be annoyed to top it off.

“Right,” Harry says. “Dobby, if I’m not back here in an hour, could you tell Hermione what happened and then come check on me?”

“Dobby will do it for Harry Potter sir!”

“And can you open a window near the Room, please? The closest you can find with no portraits watching it.”

“At once, sir!” and the elf disappears with a snap of his fingers.

Harry throws on his pyjamas and holster and opens his own window a crack. He shivers at the gust that tries to push it further. Merlin’s balls, but his room is going to be freezing when he gets back.

The windows aren’t large – can’t have eleven-year-olds toppling out – but if they’re big enough for Hedwig they’re certainly big enough for Harry. He shrinks, down and down, until he is no bigger than a walnut and the window towers above him. He fluffs up his feathers against the wind and pumps his wings in a few figure-eight motions to warm up. The air is thick like water and carving through it is more like swimming than flying. He beats his wings faster, harder, until the air hums with his movement and he can feel them take up his weight. Only his claws keep him down, so he jumps.

He has the night skies to himself. It is too cold for moths and bats, and the owls were chased off before the Ministry raised the castle wards. Harry zips around Gryffindor tower and heads for the seventh floor. Navigating Hogwarts is quite different from the outside, but he’s had months to get used to it.

He spies the open window in a disused classroom further down the seventh-floor corridor. Harry buzzes past the opening, quick enough to see inside but too quickly to be seen by anyone. It seems clear, so he hovers at the window for a closer look. No portraits, no omnioculars and no people. Excellent. Harry flies through the window and lands on his usual, much larger feet. The shock of cold helpfully informs him that he has forgotten shoes.

Harry sticks his head out into the corridor. Clear again. He hurries to the Room – currently blending into the wall much like a certain reptilian common room Harry will deny any knowledge of. Harry wandlessly casts the spell to unlock his holster and, somewhat fatalistically, creeps inside.

The room is grand and very, very green. It has even more snake motifs than Harry expected. Riddle isn’t visible from the doorway, and Harry

hesitates before stepping inside and pulling the door shut. It seals with a soft click.

A dark head of hair pops up over the back of the couch. “Good evening, Harry.” Riddle is sitting in front of the fire, leaning one arm over the back of the lounge to face Harry.

Harry inclines his head. “Riddle.”

He keeps his arms open, ready to draw, but Riddle merely waves him to the chairs in a broad, lazy gesture.

And, well, it is much warmer over there. Harry picks the closest seat to the hearth, even though it puts him on the lounge next to Riddle.

Riddle gives him a once over and raises an eyebrow. Harry looks surreptitiously down his shirt, but he did remember to put it on, and he didn’t dribble toothpaste down it – which is when he realises it’s inside out. Lovely. He’s all sorts of put-together tonight.

Deciding he might as well proceed with no shame, Harry stretches his chilly toes closer to the fire. “You call me out my bed in the middle of the night, this is what you get.”

Riddle ignores the hint to get on with it. He calls, “Dobby?” and a tray pops onto the coffee table, laden with steaming hot chocolate, biscuits and cheese. “Thank you.”

Harry’s stomach growls. He burns energy at a rate of knots in his animagus form.

“You’ll trust Dobby not to poison you, I presume,” Riddle says, and he gestures Harry forward to serve himself before Riddle could have an opportunity to tamper with it. How sinisterly thoughtful.

Harry fixes himself a mug and handful of snacks. He stares into the fire and wonders if there is any point trying to hurry Riddle along to get the nastiness over with.

“What did Dumbledore want?” Riddle asks.

And that was not where Harry expected this conversation to go. Perhaps it is small talk, but if so, it is an odd choice of topic. Off put, Harry plays his least valuable card. “To talk about compassion.”

“I hope he told you there’s a time and place.”

“The opposite. You know Dumbledore.”

Riddle rolls his eyes. “Yes, the antithesis of pragmatic.”

It occurs to Harry that Riddle might not know he spoke to Ganz, yet. Harry strikes all plans for getting to the point from his mind. He does not want to be in the vicinity when Riddle finds out, in case he does need some time to cool off.

“You have the same problem,” Riddle is saying. “He shouldn’t be encouraging you – compassion will be your undoing.”

“Feelings are not a weakness, Riddle.”

“Not if you keep them to yourself. Shout them to the world and the world will use them as leverage.” Riddle leans toward him. “You’re hiding your strengths well, but you’ve revealed your weaknesses. If the gamemakers want to hurt you, to make a message out of you before they orchestrate your death, they’ll go after your friends first.”

Harry narrows his eyes. “And what about you? Got plans to make a message out of me before you kill me?”

“No,” Riddle says. “I’d make it quick.”

For some reason, Harry believes him. His hackles lower a tad, and he shuffles back to friendlier ground. “So, you’re saying I should isolate myself to protect the others. That’s what Umbridge wants.”

“Ah, so you’ve figured it out.”

“It is fairly obvious. They’re keeping us busy, removed all bonding activities, made decrees blocking socialising. Everything is focused on the competition, setting us up as allies or enemies, never friends.”

“Mhmm. Why?”

The Ministry hates multiple survivors – it always seems to circle back to that. “The past Games when there were two or more survivors – how often were they good friends or lovers?”

Riddle’s smile tells him he’s on the right track before his words confirm it. “All but one. The exception was Garnier’s mentor, an insect animagus. She hid the entire Games and, while the last Blood Supremacist was hunting her, she claimed the Cup. The Supremacist killed himself a year later rather than live as a blood traitor.”

“The Ministry really don’t like multiple survivors,” Harry says, leadingly. He’s hoping Riddle with expound more on how the Games work, because it’s clear he knows much more than Harry does. Riddle just blinks lazily.

“You’ll grow your alliance just to spite the Ministry, then?” Riddle says, and once again Harry double guesses whether Riddle knows about Ganz. “Not very smart of you,” Riddle says with more interest than scorn.

“It’ll work.”

Riddle holds one hand palm up. “A stable, small, tightknit group of friends, or –” he raises his other palm “– a large, unstable alliance.”

Maybe Riddle *does* know about Ganz and is trying to persuade Harry to give her up. Harry certainly wouldn’t consider Ganz part of a close friend group.

“We can make a big group work,” Harry insists again.

Riddle tilts his head. “Are you familiar with the prisoner’s dilemma?”

“No, what is it?”

“A famous thought experiment which predicts how rational people will behave in a situation where there is incentive to –” Riddle cuts himself off with a wave of his hand. “Never mind. First, let’s play a game.”

“What kind of game?”

“A word game. No need to be so suspicious, Harry,” Riddle grins. “Say I go to Professor Snape and McGonagall, and I tell them to choose what they’re going to have for breakfast tomorrow. If they both pick toast, I’ll give each of them a sickle. If one of them picks toast and the other one picks bacon, I’ll give the person with bacon a galleon and the other gets nothing. If they both pick bacon, I’ll give them each a knut. I’ll tell them the rules, but they can’t communicate with each other before they make their decision. They’re only going to play once, and the result is final. What will they do?”

Harry spends a minute trying to figure out a way for them to rig the system so they can both walk away with half a galleon, but there is no way to guarantee only one will pick bacon. The next best option is for them to both pick toast and settle for one sickle each, but it has the

same problem. Except, “If McGonagall thinks Snape is going to eat toast, she should pick bacon because she’ll get a galleon. If she thinks Snape is going to pick bacon, she should also pick bacon because a knut is better than nothing. Snape will think the same thing. So they will both pick bacon.”

“Yes, and they’ll each be twenty-eight knuts poorer than if they’d both picked toast. That’s the prisoner’s dilemma – the optimal outcome for all only occurs when all prisoners cooperate, but in each case the best option for each prisoner is to betray the other.” Riddle has shuffled around, so he is facing Harry front on, staring wickedly over the rim of his hot chocolate. “Interesting, isn’t it, that you can engineer a situation to get people to make purely selfish decisions which act against their best interests.”

“Interesting is one word for it.”

Riddle gets more comfortable against the armrest. He tucks his socked feet into the warm spot between Harry and the back of the couch. They are like icicles – Harry hisses and slaps at his shins. Riddle continues undeterred. “Now, real situations are rarely as simple as the typical prisoner’s dilemma, but think about your alliance. Imagine you all make it to the third task, and it’s just your group left. What do you get if you cooperate?”

“We could all survive.”

“Maybe,” Riddle agrees. “If the final task isn’t too deadly and no one defects. What if one person kills all the others – what do they get?”

“Twenty thousand galleons. Fame. Prestige.” Nightmares. Dead friends. Eternal regrets.

“And a guarantee that they won’t be betrayed and killed first. They know they’ll live. The more champions die, the better the odds for those remaining.”

“But unlike your breakfast dilemma, we can talk and cooperate.”

“You’re assuming their values align with yours, and you’re all working toward the common goal of survival. How well do you know your allies, really?” Riddle flexes his toes and Harry shivers. “You’re fairly sure about Görder and Bones, because they’re nice girls and they need you for protection – at least until you take out the big threats, and then they could poison you or curse you while you sleep.”

“But why would they?” Riddle asks rhetorically, before Harry can protest exactly that. “Twenty thousand galleons is a fortune. Görder is orphan, like you, did you know? She has been bullied for only owning castoffs all her life. Bones has a trust fund, so perhaps the coin won’t tempt her – but survivors must live with the stigma and the consequences. Her family is involved in the Ministry. Her parents may well lose their jobs if their daughter became a blood traitor. The same goes for Diggory and Davies and their families. And Davies is mighty keen on fame and prestige – he’s not the smartest Ravenclaw or the best-looking bloke or the school Quidditch star, so this might be his big break. Trelawny wants to prove herself, to be taken seriously. Krum or Ivankova? Delacour? Ganz or Penchev? You barely know them. Face it, the only person you can be sure of is Hermione.”

If Riddle is trying to unnerve him, he has succeeded. Harry is shaken, but instead of being motivated to abandon them all, he is resigned. Riddle can undermine Harry’s confidence and plant seeds of doubt and suspicion, and Harry will have to put it out of his mind, because if he shows he doesn’t trust his allies, they won’t trust him. If they believe he’ll betray them they’ll certainly strike first, because Harry *can’t*. If they attack, he’ll defend himself, but he can’t stab them in the back – he couldn’t live with himself.

“The ability to communicate doesn’t change the outcome of the prisoner’s dilemma because people can *lie*,” Riddle continues flaying into him with brutal truths, head resting on his fist and eyes half-lidded. “What matters is how many times you play. People tend to cooperate more of they know they’ll need your help or fear revenge. With repeated encounters, you learn who you can and cannot trust. But it all goes out the window when you know you’re playing the last round, and you can all strive for the biggest payoff. Maybe your alliance would last the first and second task, but the third and last? Not a chance.”

Riddle nurses the last of his hot chocolate, watching Harry flit through expressions with interest. He tosses his empty cup to the table and it lightly touches down. Harry has to lean forward to dump his mug, like a normal person, and he takes the opportunity to elbow Riddle’s feet out from behind him.

Riddle accepts the shoving with a little malicious compliance, sticking his legs in Harry’s lap instead. With the fire doing unfair things to his profile, especially his smug grin, Harry’s brain whites out and by the time it comes back online it seems too late (and too telling) to protest.

“Did Dumbledore mention the Order of the Phoenix?” Riddle asks.

Whiplash. That’s what Harry is getting. Conversation whiplash. Harry tries to pass his shock off as confusion, but fears he’s confirmed Riddle’s suspicions. Which was probably Riddle’s intention.

Harry’s mind is whirring to catch up. Dumbledore’s mention of the Order seemed to come out of nowhere, but if Riddle anticipated the headmaster would bring it up – Riddle knows something. The questions Harry has been turning over endlessly might have answers. “Why do you suppose he would mention it?”

“He is their leader.”

“If you say so, but why would he tell me?”

“Dumbledore always has his reasons, though he rarely deigns to share them.” Riddle taps his fingers on the back of the couch, staring thoughtfully. Riddle reaches a conclusion after a long silence. “You don’t know anything useful. He did not tell you his plans. Hmm, I really thought he would.”

“Why?” Harry demands.

Riddle grins. “Duel me and I’ll tell you.”

Harry drops his head back with a groan.

“I don’t ask because I want to find your measure – I’ve already figured it out. I *know* how good you are.”

The little annoying voice in Harry’s head perks up, because if he has nothing to hide, then there is no reason for restraint, and a no-holds duel would be *fun*. He ruthlessly pummels it into submission.

“I also know you’d be a bigger threat if you loosen your scruples. I think that is what annoys me most about Dumbledore’s meddling,” Riddle says. “Whatever his main motivation, a side effect is he is conspiring to deny me a good fight. Unless it isn’t the compassion holding you back – maybe it is fear. You recognise yourself in me, don’t you? You’re afraid of what the Games could turn you into.”

“And you’ve rejected compassion. You’ll reach your full potential by any means necessary, because there can’t be anything worse than dying insignificant.” Harry stands and dumps Riddle’s feet off him. “Good night, Riddle.”

“Sweet dreams,” Riddle says.

“Fuck off,” Harry says pleasantly, because thanks to Riddle, Harry is sure to be staring at the ceiling for the rest of the night. There’s little chance of dreams, sweet or otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

> What kind of currency isn’t divisible by two? The only way to get half a galleon is to chop it.
>
> On a more relevant note: I didn't have time for more than a quick read-through on the plane going on 30 hrs with no sleep, so let me know if you spot mistakes.
> I'm enjoying Belgium a lot but I'm flat out working and sightseeing, so I don't know when the next chapter will be posted - hopefully before I leave in July.

Week 3 day three to six

Chapter Summary

> Harry and Riddle play gay chicken and may or may not realise that's what they're doing.

Chapter Notes

> My Belgium trip was really successful, guys! I'm going to write at least two papers from the work, which will build on the one I've got in the works now. I'm going to be hella busy for the next year, but on the plus side I don't have to rework my entire thesis, which was on the cards because there was no guarantee I'd succeed in Belgium and my entire project hinged on it working. I'm glad to be home though. Sorry to keep you waiting, here's more story. I'm going to ease back in, probably posting once a fortnight to start with until life is under control again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Riddle doesn't hassle Harry when he's busy training, but once Harry has finished and is preparing to leave, apparently, he is fair game. Riddle has taken to striking up conversation as he is packing up, and conversations with Riddle are never the casual kind that are easy to extract oneself from. Riddle can conjure an argument out of thin air, and Harry can't just walk away and let him *win*. It is a gambit that never fails. So, the long and short of it, Riddle has taken to walking with Harry between their classes while the omnioculars conveniently look the other way.

"Someone is going to catch on if you do that too often," Harry says.

"Forgive me for wanting a moment with you to keep for myself," Riddle's gaze drops to Harry's lips, and when he looks up, he can't quite meet Harry's eyes. His tongue darts out nervously. Harry catches himself mimicking the gesture, wondering if Riddle's lips would feel softer than his own.

Harry shakes himself. "This again?"

Riddle tilts his head to a new angle. "What if I'm not trying to seduce you? Have you considered that I might genuinely have feelings for you?"

“Loads of feelings, I’m sure. Confusion. Curiosity.”

“Frustration?” Riddle suggests, jostling him.

Harry hides a grin.

“Don’t laugh at me,” Riddle says quietly. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I haven’t felt this way before. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

Riddle sounds completely sincere. It is immensely flattering for Harry to catch the attention of such a competent man. He feels it settle inside him, and it makes him stand straighter, but it doesn’t overwrite the suspicion and fear.

The second time their hands brush, Harry realises it’s not an accident.

Oh, what the hell, Harry thinks. Riddle can do flirty, but can he do affectionate? He catches Riddle’s hand the third time, laces their fingers. Harry raises an eyebrow.

Riddle either takes it as a challenge or encouragement, because the next thing Harry knows an arm is around his shoulders, warmth pressed all down his side. Harry has walked this way with Ron and Hermione dozens of times, but it never made his heart race, never felt hot enough to brand him.

Riddle’s movements lack his usual surety – he isn’t used to this. His hesitation is grounding. It makes Harry feel less out of his depth, gives him enough control to calm his blush. His breathing doubles to compensate. He likes that he keeps Riddle on edge. Riddle’s smirk tells Harry he is perfectly aware of the places Harry’s mind is going.

Throughout one very solicitous day, Harry, simply by showing himself a willing participant, encourages Riddle to try different seduction methods. Within the variation, the common threads become visible, and Harry starts to weave a pattern: Riddle is following Harry’s lead, reacting to his cues. Riddle leans in when Harry wants him closer, whispers words Harry wants to hear, he challenges Harry when Harry is in the mood. He doesn’t stop being a bit of a bastard, because apparently Harry likes that short of thing. *That’s* how he manipulates people, stringing them along with their desires, like a carrot on a stick. Harry has figured out how Riddle operates, and that’s all he wanted to know. He should put a stop to this, but being around Riddle is not unpleasant, and now Harry is curious to see how far Riddle will go.

Harry braces himself to keep a straight face by calming his mind. Occlumency is handy for that sort of thing, and, incidentally, why Snape has no sense of humour. Riddle's brow creases and he narrows his eyes. Undeterred, Harry starts lamenting autumn and spring as seasons that ought not to exist, and Riddle jumps in on their defence. Harry sets in on spring especially harshly; he reckons he can get flowers out of Riddle at least. Alas–

"You're fucking with me," Riddle realises.

Harry is betrayed by a grin he's too slow to hide. "Absolutely."

Harry probably should've confessed when Riddle *wasn't* plastered up against him on a balcony above a large drop. Harry half expects Riddle to push him over. Instead, Riddle drops his head onto Harry's shoulder in frustration and growls. The sound, the vibration, makes Harry shiver all over. He pats Riddle's head, extra patronising, and earns a truly delightful glare.

"Turnabout is fair play," Harry says with a grin. It turns out Harry is a bit of a bastard, too.

"I could have feelings for you," Riddle insists into Harry's shoulder.

"You could, but you don't."

"Are you quite certain?" Riddle says, arm tightening almost involuntarily around Harry's waist.

"Yes." Harry huffs.

"Damnit," Riddle releases him, takes a step back and slouches against the wall. He demands, "How can you tell?"

Harry props himself up on the opposite wall. Amused, he says, "I'm not giving you an instruction manual to do better next time."

Harry knows how Riddle looks at him – like he's a puzzle. Something confusing, something intriguing, but nevertheless an object to pry secrets out of. It is flattering, but it isn't affection. It isn't even attraction, which is the minimum Harry would require in a partner for a bit of no-strings-attached fun, if he was into that kind of thing. He might've been, if he'd discovered this part of himself anywhere other than the Games. The Games change everything. No amount of fun now is worth dying for later.

“Fine. I’m not attracted to you,” Riddle admits. He has relaxed out of the seductive pose. Slouched and grumpy, he is still offensively good-looking. Then, curiously, “Doesn’t that bother you?”

“A bit,” Harry says. It’s hard not to feel a little lacking when the man he finds incredibly sexy doesn’t think of him the same way. “But attraction to someone doesn’t entitle me to a return of the same feelings.”

Harry’s dad taught him that– said it was a lesson he’d wished he’d learnt a lot earlier as he explained the mess he’d made of pursuing Lily.

Harry knows it’s risky, but he says. “Now that I think of it, the idea of kissing you is honestly a bit repulsive. Does *that* bother *you*?”

Riddle narrows his eyes. “I would admit it stings my professional pride, but I don’t believe you. You are attracted to me. You’ve enjoyed every moment of my company. You can’t tell me you haven’t fantasised about kissing me.”

Harry turns deep scarlet. He protests, “Fantasies are different.”

“Fantasies show what you want.”

“It’s not a real person with their own thoughts and feelings. In fantasies they can want you back,” Harry bites his lip, wishing he’d cut himself off sooner.

Riddle pauses. Blinks. “You will have to explain how I’ve… offended you.” He grimaces around the word, like he knows it’s the wrong shape but can’t find the right one.

“The idea of kissing anyone who doesn’t want to kiss me but feels like they have to, for any reason–” Harry eyes Riddle, “even if that reason is to manipulate me – feels icky. Like I’m somehow coercing them.” Hence, repulsive. Whatever attraction Harry feels is more than balanced out.

Riddle crosses his arms. “I can make my own choices. It’s for me to decide what I am and am not comfortable doing.”

“Sure, but I get to make the same decision. Snuggle me in the hallways all you like, but I’ll draw the line at kissing someone who doesn’t want to kiss me.”

Riddle is silent for a long time. Minutes pass. Harry is considering going inside to warm up, when Riddle speaks. “It is easier to lie with the truth,” he says slowly.

Harry inclines his head because it is hardly a revolutionary statement.

“You must understand, then, why I am so surprised I failed with you. This has been far easier for me than usual,” Riddle says frankly. “I have never been able to seduce someone while also being true to myself.”

Harry is still reeling when Riddle continues piling more on.

“You were right – I do find you confusing and challenging. You are *quick* – you keep surprising me. You are a very interesting person. And it’s true that I haven’t felt this way before. Most people are hopelessly dull, and I do not enjoy pretending to be interested in their menial traits and hobbies. This,” he gestures between them, “is far from objectionable to me. Attraction, I suspect, would only be a matter of time.”

Harry raises his eyebrows. He has considered the possibility late at night, but he did not expect to see the sentiment come from Riddle. “Even if you were attracted to me, it doesn’t matter. We’re not allies. I’m not looking to get attached to my enemies.” It almost makes it worse. To be denied due to unequal feelings is what it is, but to be denied what they both want solely due to shitty circumstances – that’s *galling*.

“If I was attracted to you, obviously things would change,” Riddle rolls his eyes. “We could be allies.”

“Really,” Harry says flatly.

“I’m attracted to competence, Harry,” Riddle says. “And if you fight as well as I suspect you do, I won’t need the Supremacists. If you impressed me more than Bellatrix…”

“Ah,” Harry realises, “so your next tactic is to convince *me* to seduce *you* by showing off.”

With the sound of a bull in a shop of boiling China kettles, Riddle throws up his hands. “You are *infuriating*.”

He levels Harry with a hot-eyed glare. It’s more honest than the smouldering looks Harry’s seen all day. Harry’s stomach does

something acrobatic and a little bit frightening.

Riddle stalks forward. Harry steps back but he runs up against stone. Riddle snaps his fingers, a blur of colour forms and Riddle thrusts it into Harry's chest. "Here!"

Harry looks down. It's a flower. Delicate and perfect despite the rough handling.

"What's this for?" Harry asks, running on autopilot.

Riddle's fingers are still pressed against Harry's rapidly beating heart. Riddle stays there a moment, visibly reeling in his fraying control. When he is calm, he continues. "It's what you wanted."

Something wary creeps up Harry's spine. How did Riddle know? In the end, he voices a less revealing suspicion, "Is it going to bite me?"

"No," Riddle says. His lips twitch and he says, "Consider it a compliment." Then he's gone. Harry automatically catches the flower before it hits the ground.

Harry goes straight to Hermione. She is in the first place he looked – the library, naturally. He waves the flower in her face without preamble. "Riddle gave me a flower and told me it was a compliment. What is he talking about?"

Hermione, blessedly, does not ask the usual questions which would follow such an announcement. "You shouldn't sleep through history."

"Probably not," Harry agrees. "But I don't see what one has to do with the other unless flowers started a goblin war?"

"They did, actually."

"Wait, really?"

"The upper classes used to use flowers as a coded language. The Minister thought he was sending a flattering apology the goblins would appreciate, because purple is the richest of colours and purple flowers commonly mean admiration. But flowers mean something very different to goblins – goblins value things that last."

"Huh," says Harry. He pokes a purple petal. It's velvet soft.

There are books on the topic, of course, and Harry and Hermione are conveniently already in just the place to find some.

“Here,” Hermione drags down a surprisingly heavy, dusty tome. The spine groans as she opens it.

“A… B… C… D… dahlias. Good grief, there’s a list,” Hermione mutters. “Not red – strength and power. Or white – focus, innocence. Nor blue – fresh start, positive change. Here: *a bouquet of pink or purple dahlias is used in appreciation of kindness, feminine beauty, and grace*.”

Harry chokes. “*Feminine* beauty?”

Hermione looks him up and down. “No, I don’t see it. I suppose it’s in the eye of the beholder?”

“You’re taking the piss,” he accuses. “Lemme see.”

Hermione turns the book around smugly. She’s not taking the piss. He reads twice more to make sure. There are too many categories, and they are very repetitive. He can’t believe people bothered to remember this stuff. *Way* too many categories, he corrects himself as he flips over the page. Near to bottom he sees, ‘*One would gift a single dahlia to express the recipient has good taste*.’

Harry blinks.

Then he nearly falls over laughing.

“What?” Hermione demands.

Harry points to the line, wheezing.

“Harry, I don’t get it.”

“He is saying I have good taste. In fancying him! Consider it a compliment, he said – complimenting *himself*!”

“That… does sound like Tom,” Hermione says.

Harry twirls the flower a few times, grinning broadly. He tucks the dahlia out of sight in his shirt, instead of his hair. As funny as it would be to wear to dinner, Umbridge would certainly confiscate it. Harry rather thinks he might keep it.

…

The Ministry televises the Games for an hour each night. Omnioculars following each champion all day means hundreds of hours of training

and teenage spats and the occasional nervous meltdown to condense into a show for their captive audience, so the boring, supposedly lonely walks between classes are not a high priority. It would explain why it takes a few days for someone to notice the gaps in Harry and Riddle's round-the-clock surveillance. But notice they do.

"Actually, there's some debate about the origin of manticores," Harry says, and how they got onto this topic from their regularly scheduled venting about Umbridge, Harry can't quite recall. "There were some fossil teeth found in Crete that predated the earliest signs in mainland Greece by a thousand years. The curious bit is how they got to Greece – not the best swimmers, manticores."

"Older than the Greek myths, really?"

"Yeah, Fawlson wrote a piece in Mystic Beasts, I think."

"Fawlson! Don't tell me you trust his work. The man is a complete tool," Riddle objects. He opens his mouth to continue but pauses. "Harry, how are you at hide and seek?"

Harry catches on quickly. He may have assumed weeks ago that a head boy would be the type to hold rules sacred, but he knows better by now. Riddle's personal philosophy views rules and limitations as things average people accept when they do not want to be exceptional.

"There's a permeable wall behind the statue in the next corridor," Harry says.

"We can make it," Riddle says with a sideways smirk which makes Harry's heartrate kick up. Riddle taps his own forehead first, then Harry's, and they blend into the background.

Grinning broadly to no one, Harry grabs Riddle's hand and runs. It may not be the stealthiest way to escape, but it is fun. Riddle must agree, because he gives an indignant grumble which is all show, if the way he keeps up is any indication.

The noise alerts their pursuers – aurors, it turns out. The risk is a sweet, addicting rush. Harry wants to *almost* get caught. He wants the Ministry to know that they got away, that some of the champions pulled one over them.

Heavy footfalls pick up behind them, soon followed by shouts of "Stop!" and "Who goes there!" and "Where are they?" but Harry and

Riddle are already squeezing into the secret passage. They jostle each other. Riddle pushes Harry into a wall and Harry trips him in return. They emerge, snickering, a floor below and pass by the library and several broom closets. Terrible hiding places. One *homenum revelio* spell and they'd be done for. The Ministry might be able to work out the only missing champions are him and Riddle by process of elimination, but unless they've also got eyes on every single trainer, mentor and support staff, they can't prove jack shit unless they're caught.

Besides, these aurors will report a *pair* of footsteps. Harry came from the transfigurations room and Riddle was just in potions. In a few minutes, Riddle will be in the duelling ring and Harry will be practicing warding. Their paths would only overlap if they both went far out of their way to ensure it, and with all the rules in place, when could they have possibly arranged such a thing?

"Anyway," Riddle says, ducking into another short-cut. He keeps his voice low, partly, Harry is sure, as an excuse to whisper into Harry's ear. Harry can't see it coming and the shock heightens the feeling. Riddle doesn't miss an opportunity to flirt, but he knows when a strategy isn't going to work, and he doesn't waste time with dead ends – so the persistent flirting is more of a running joke between them. Harry leans closer and his hair brushes Riddle's cheek, earning a small startled breath. Harry grins. It's much rarer that Harry will break Riddle's composure, but worth it every time. He leans back again before they can bonk heads – a less fun side effect of being invisible.

Riddle clears his throat. "Haven't you heard of Fawlson's theory on time travel?"

"No. I take it you disagree?"

"It's utter rubbish."

"Well, I won't consult his work if I ever want to know about time turners. It doesn't mean he's wrong about everything, manticores in particular. He was a magizoologist, not a chronologist."

"You shouldn't assume he is right just because he was slightly less uneducated about creatures," Riddle fires back. "It says a lot about his character, that he would confidently assert his opinion on topics he knew nothing about."

Riddle is getting worked up. Harry eyes him, reconsidering. "How bad are we talking?"

Riddle pulls Harry to a stop before he can jump a trick step. “No. Down there.”

“You first,” Harry says. He refuses to be gullible enough to get stuck while Riddle leaves him to get the aurors off his own back.

“Ye of little faith,” Riddle says. He sits on the stair above the fake and shimmies forward. The step gleefully gobbles up his feet, and the rest of him, until only his fingers a clinging on, then they too disappear. Harry follows suit and drops into another secret passage. He thinks he recognises it as the path from the fourth floor to the second – he’ll know for sure if there’s a slide a little further on.

“It’s bad,” Riddle continues where he left off, as if sneaking around is barely an inconvenience. “Fawlson thinks paradoxes prove there is some kind of restoring force in the universe that acts to preserve the timeline.”

“And the existence of one timeline, instead of branching possibilities or a multiverse, is supposed to prove this?” Harry checks.

“Yes,” Riddle says with a grimace.

Nope, Harry doesn’t follow. “How?”

“Oh, don’t look for logic. This is the kicker – you see, he thinks the universe will implode or something if you cause a paradox.”

“But you can’t cause a paradox,” Harry says, because that’s how he’s always understood the definition. He supposes he could be wrong. “Isn’t that the point?”

“Yes, exactly! The grandfather paradox, for instance – if you want to go back and kill someone before their time, you already know the outcome – they survived, you didn’t succeed. Whether you failed because you tripped and broke your neck, or you could only get your target with a slow acting poison, you might explain their eventual cause of death but you won’t change the original timing. At best, time travel just gives you more information on past events. At worst, it’s futile.”

“Oh, there’s a thought,” Harry says. He takes the slide down two floors with a bit of a runup because there’s a little ramp at the end and if he hits it fast enough, he’ll land on his feet. Any faster and he’ll land on his face, but what’s life without a little risk. The dark makes judging the landing tricky, and he stumbles but keeps his footing

because he's only done this a thousand times. "We can travel through time, but we can't actually change the past. So our future will be influenced by the decisions we make now – okay, that's normal – but the existence of time travel implies there are actions in our present that are being influence by decision we will make in the future. That's wild."

"That, Harry, is what Fawlson fails to grasp – the conservation of causality. Time is non-linear, it can loop back on itself, and time is convergent, meaning there are no branching paths, but cause and effect are preserved. And you can only consider the interesting implications of time travel once one understands this basic logic," Riddle adds with a scowl which could move Fawlson to roll in his grave.

"Fate?" Harry guesses.

"Yes," Riddle says, eyes sparkling. "There is clearly some level of predetermined fate, but to what extent? Is every movement of the universe fated from the beginning until the end of time? Some academics think so."

"You don't," Harry observes.

"Mhmm. Eternal fate seems like the simplest explanation at face value, but it falls apart a bit when trying to explain away chaos theory and divination."

"There must be some level of determinism."

"Yes, but perhaps it is just locally deterministic. See, the universe is in a set state at the present moment, which limits the possible states in the immediate future, but the further you project from the present, the more possibilities emerge. Say – if a ball is left alone on top of a hill, for the next little while, all it is going to do is roll down, and the exact path is fairly predictable. It won't levitate or transform into a beagle. But if a wizard comes along, suddenly there are many more options and you can't guess what will happen next."

"Then, I suppose, you think divination is only possible up to a certain point."

"Only *useful* to a point, rather. I think the error or uncertainty increases with the time between the prediction and the event, until the predictions are no better than a random guess."

“If that’s right, you must be able to predict the predictive power of prophecies,” Harry says lightly, aiming to earn a smirk for his phrasing, but Riddle is impressed by his reasoning instead.

“Yes, that is precisely what I found! I went through the research comparing divination methods, pooled their data, and time was the strongest predictor. It turns out prophecies have something of a shelf-life; at most only useful a couple decades after the prediction is made. Unfortunately, most prophecies don’t include helpful hints about the date, so you’ll rarely know from the offset, but if events don’t occur in a few years, you can safely ignore it.”

Harry’s eyebrows scoot up his forehead. “Tell me you published that.”

“Work in progress. I’m having a bit of a row with the reviewers. One wants me to expand on a minor tangent so I’ll reference several of his papers, the other can’t get over my surname and lack of credentials. These Games should shut up the latter, but I expect the former to get even worse,” Riddle sighs, aggrieved. “I’ll get Barty to pass a letter to the editor explaining the delay. But if she hasn’t figured out by now that the journal can use my article to jump on a publicity bandwagon to boost their sales, I hold no hope for her as a businesswoman.”

Boost the journals sales, yes, because it would turn Riddle into a sensation. Harry narrows his eyes. “Exactly how long have you been sitting on this article?”

Riddle’s smirk spreads slowly, lazily. “Long enough. I took it slowly during my OWL year. There was no rush.”

“You play a long con,” Harry says, unsurprised to hear Riddle has been planning his life so far in advance, but constantly taken aback by the depth and creativity of the particulars. Harry’s friends barely know what careers they want when they graduate.

Harry peers around a corner before crossing an open atrium. The detour to escape put them a bit off track, but Harry will be hard pressed to consider it time wasted. He probably should. Every other minute spent outside a potentially life-saving lesson seems to tighten a vice around Harry’s chest, and the nagging urgency to train gets too loud to ignore. He’s given up on politeness when extracting himself from lengthy conversations. Slughorn, by now, thinks Harry is either quite rude or traumatised and reluctant to talk about his parents.

But talks with Riddle are always interesting, and it’s just better utilising the time he spends walking between classes anyway. If it

takes a few minutes longer than it should… well. Harry isn't under any delusions that he is learning anything especially useful for the arena in these conversations, except perhaps when Riddle is musing about exactly what he'd like to do to Umbridge.

("Conjured snake venom, Harry. It's finicky to get the right proteins instead of any old vaguely yellow liquid, but the right mix will do terrible damage to the cells and organs. And if you make it a weak conjuration, the evidence vanishes itself – untraceable. Excellent for an assassination, wouldn't you say?" "I'd say you disturb me.")

Their talks don't accomplish anything, he should be training, but when Harry's attention is consumed by Riddle, he doesn't feel the need. It loosens the vice around his chest, quiets the nagging urge. Harry can forget he's supposed to be training because there's nothing he'd rather be doing. It's a relief to have peace for a while. So Harry doesn't hurry his steps. He rolls the concepts around in his head. "Divination has a much greater reach than time turners. They can only go back at most, what, a week?"

"Thereabouts, yes. My research supports the theory the limit on time turners is a technological hiccup rather than us bumping up against a universal law. Another fascinating field. Did you know time turners were adapted from portkeys which travel faster than light. Master Madlen Schiller made the first one by accident, figured out a trick in the arithmancy to make a portkey that would work instantly, and she wound up arriving just before she'd left."

"Really?" Harry asks, and they're off on another tangent. Harry has long since accustomed himself to reality: Riddle knows a bit about everything and a lot about a lot of things.

…

Harry barrels through the door just as the last bell tolls. "I'm not late!"

He isn't interested in quibbling over whether the first or last bell marks the hour, and he will not be taking comments at this time.

His declaration does not reach his intended audience. Hermione is alone in the room, no sign of McGonagall or Snape.

"They're late?" Harry says. That isn't like them. His arms fall limply to his sides.

Hermione is leaning on the windowsill. Looking down at something,

she says, “Professor Snape certainly will be.”

Harry peers over her shoulder. The near-luminescent robes mark Dumbledore clearly, and the dark and gloomy shape beside him, which at first appears to be his shadow, is the potions professor. They are too far away to make out expression or general tone, not that Snape would be anything other than dour.

“Huh. I wonder what that’s about,” Harry says. Snape isn’t the kind to forget an appointment or skip on a whim. Harry reaches for the window latch. “I reckon I could find out, though, since McGonagall isn’t here either.”

“Thirty seconds without supervision and I see plotting is afoot. I sincerely hope you are not planning anything nefarious, Mr Potter.” Professor McGonagall strides into the room.

Harry gives the scene one more curious glance, then he flashes McGonagall a grin. “You know what they say, Professor. When the cat’s away…”

Hermione, who doesn’t yet trust Harry’s discovery that McGonagall has a sense of humour, is staring at him in abject horror.

“Quite.” McGonagall’s expression doesn’t twitch. “Well, then. Let’s not waste any more time, Mr Potter. Let’s play.”

McGonagall draws her wand and, for want of a better word, pounces. Even once Harry manages to get enough breathing room to get his wand out of his holster, he feels very much like a ball of yarn being battered around.

He *almost* gets her. McGonagall, like all good duellist, is watching Harry’s wand for his next move. Harry goes through the motions of a stunning spell, and McGonagall raises a protego, but Harry flicks his left hand and silently demands, *accio wand!*

Her fingers reflexively clamp down and she keeps hold of it, but the sudden jerk disrupts her momentum. Harry has the upper hand for a few moments, he sends a flurry of curses through her shield, but in the end, he is cornered by a three-headed mastiff and wall of fire.

“Excellent, Mr Potter! What was it you did?” McGonagall asks.

Harry wiggles his fingers demonstrably and summons his wand back to himself. “Just a little trick. I’m working on the shield charm, too.

Tried it a few times in that last round, but it's clearly not ready for live fire yet."

"You know what that means, don't you, Mr Potter?" Snape's silky voice cuts in. He is lurking by the doorway, hands tucked into the opposite sleeves, looking unimpressed. "Drills."

Harry's heart sinks. He has learned to dread the word. Harry designed the drills in the DA to be fun. Snape's are not fun – they are infected with his special flavour of evil creativity. Snape scoffed at Harry's shield flickering practice, told him it didn't matter how fast he could cast if he'd only learnt to do it mindlessly at a predictable and exploitable rhythm. Snape then proceeded to act as the nastiest random-timing colour indicator. Harry was to cast protego against white stinging jinxes, conjure the metal shield for orange boils curses, dodge green paint spells, and attack when Snape's wand lit up blue. Earning vitriol for a slow or wrong response was the least of Harry's concerns. Snape is a big believer in the punishment side of operant conditioning. Harry waits and dreads what Snape will say next.

"Alternate wandless protego and any offensive spell. I do not want to see any repeats. You will continue until you can cast at a rate of thirty spells a minute," Snape says with relish.

Harry grimaces. He's attention is going to be consumed scrolling through his spell repertoire. He'll be surprised if he can get a chain of ten together in the timeframe.

"Hmm, and you will aim for Miss Granger," Snape says, indicating where Hermione is preparing to take her chances against McGonagall. "No sense wasting a perfectly good target."

Hermione's back is to him. Harry tries to stall until she turns around. "I was wondering, sir, whether occlumency was still a good use of our time now that Delacour is coming around to our side."

Snape gives him the You Dunce look and doesn't even honour it with an insult. "Begin."

The worst part of Snape's horrible drills is Harry has noticed his reflexes and reaction time are improving. They are undeniably effective, so Harry beings.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if you really like the flower language trope. I've developed

an a tick where I automatically roll my eyes whenever something so cliché comes up, so I had to poke a bit of fun at it.

Week 3 day seven, week 4 day one

Chapter Summary

> Harry puts a few puzzle pieces together and it's not painting a pretty picture

Harry is in the library, at the furthest desk behind the Household Charms shelves. Umbridge will have to cross the room to spot him. If that isn't enough, he is half hidden behind a pile of old newspapers. The headline in front of him announces, *'Monsters, Mer people, Mania, oh my! Five champions down!'*

Harry scratches a note on his parchment. That makes it three consecutive Games in the early 1900s with an underwater task. He hopes they've gone out of fashion, but he'll be brushing up on ways of breathing underwater and avoiding decompression sickness.

The quiet background murmur of voices suddenly rises in volume and impatience.

"Let me tell them!"

Harry's head snaps up at the sound. It's Bellatrix. He realises there is a downside of hiding in a corner – if she finds him, there won't be witnesses to keep her in line.

"No," Riddle replies.

"Come on, don't you see how much easier it would be?" Bellatrix whines. "They think you're just some upstart mudblood. Marina asked me why I hang out with you. What was I supposed to tell her?"

"I do not care about Stoeva's opinion. If you do, then find a way to justify your association with my lowly self. Terribly sorry to put you in such a difficult position."

"Oh, Tom, I didn't mean it like that. It's just – you're making it harder than it needs to be. It would be one thing if you were only associating with our kind, but you've been seen with the likes of *Potter*."

"Do not presume to police who I talk to," Riddle says, something dangerous in his tone.

"I – of course not," Bellatrix rapidly backtracks. "It's the others. I am

only trying to help you. You know how people talk. The Alliance already worries about your commitment to the cause."

"Let them worry. Soon they will be dead," Riddle dismisses the danger of the Supremacists with a snort. "The Ministry needn't fret. I will do my duty. I am committed to victory. Potter will die, just like all the others. But *before* that – I have plans, Bella. Plans with greater ambition than treading the path of most convenience for you."

"But Potter, really? That stain on my family name –"

"Potter is mine," Riddle's voice drops into a threatening hiss. "I *will* duel him. In the arena, with his life on the line, where he must pull out all his tricks. If one of you kills him before I get the chance…"

Her voice wavers but she carries on gamely, "They're not going to let you call dibs. Especially if he turns out to be as prestigious a kill as you think he will."

"Of course not. You are going to do it on my behalf."

"How do you expect me to justify it unless they *know*?"

"I don't care. Just get it done."

"If you just showed them what you can do–"

"Enough, Bella. It is my secret, not yours, and I've made my decision."

The Slytherins emerge from the shelves only a few rows away, trailed by Bellatrix's auror guard. They spot Harry immediately. Bellatrix pauses to sneer and must rush to catch up as Riddle neatly alters course.

Riddle graciously pulls out a chair for her. "Play nice, Bella. We have need of your chaperone."

She sits down automatically. Then, it seems to register – she crosses her arms and slouches. Riddle sits himself beside Harry and leans boldly over his notes. Harry would balk at sitting with two people who plan to kill him, supervised by the most blatantly paid-off auror to ever serve his own interests, but the danger is old news.

"Welcome, feel free to pull up a chair," Harry tells him, choosing to ignore the seething pretzel of Black for now. "Can I offer you refreshments? A seventh century elvish champagne, perhaps?"

“Darling, your company alone is enough of a draw for me.”

Harry scrunches his nose.

“Endearment a bit too corny?” Riddle wonders.

“Just a bit,” Harry agrees.

“Well, my dear cupcake,” Riddle simpers, because he has never encountered an opportunity to be a bastard he didn’t want to grasp with both hands. Harry fights a grin and takes a swing at his shins under the table. Riddle pre-emptively dodges. Harry, too, is predictable. Riddle tsks, “You shouldn’t admit a weakness to an enemy.”

“Speaking of enemies,” Harry says. “Tell me about this super-secret thing you can do.”

“Eavesdropping, were you? How shameless.”

Harry shrugs, indeed, quite lacking in shame. “I was here first. Don’t go dropping eaves in public if you don’t want someone to pick them up.”

Bellatrix opens her mouth, but a look from Riddle and it snaps shut.

“Must be quite a skill if it will impress the Supremacists,” Harry muses, tapping his quill. It leaves dark blotches on his parchment that he is distantly aware he will regret later. “Or something that will impress Supremacists in particular – rare, deadly or pure?”

“Now, that would be telling.”

It won’t be the wandless magic. Riddle hasn’t sworn Harry and Hermione to secrecy, and it’s not a prestigious skill, besides.

“Animagus?” Harry guesses. Maybe. “Not unique enough to impress unless your form is something incredible. Or metamorphmagus? No, Hermione would know from your childhood. And it’s staggeringly unlikely given how closely it usually sticks to blood lines. How about true sight – are you a seer?”

Riddle just grins beatifically. Harry can’t rule it out. He knows Riddle has a strong interest in divination and fate.

Harry supposes, when Bellatrix said Riddle should show them what he can do, she might not have been referring to a specific skill, more an

allegorical ‘show them your true might’ sort of thing. Harry has certainly suspected Riddle is holding back in duelling, but it doesn’t seem like something Riddle is keeping secret, though – rather, he exerts himself as much as he needs to get the job done.

“How about an exchange?” Riddle suggests.

“Oh, here it comes,” Harry drops his quill and leans back.

“I might tell you for a duel.”

“Yep, there it is,” Harry shakes his head. “You fucking knew I was here the whole time, didn’t you.”

Though Harry has no idea how. This spot is well hidden. Harry would have heard him if Riddle had been close enough to spot him earlier.

And just like that, it clicks. Riddle knows. He *always* knows. He knew about the flower, even – “You’re a –”

“Not aloud, please,” Riddle interrupts.

Because he knew what Harry was about to say. Because he’s a legilimens. Oh, shit. Oh, *fuck*.

“Yes,” Riddle smiles. “I certainly am. Very clever, Harry. You caught on faster than I expected. And my expectations were flattering, I assure you.”

It’s obvious in hindsight. All this time – from the first moment their eyes met behind the Goblet of Fire, when Harry spotted the danger, he caught Riddle’s attention. Harry remembers a hundred moments like it. He has been staring at a half-finished picture, a collage of moments when Riddle hinted he knew more than he should. Something taunting that was leaning just on the edge of playful. But Riddle doesn’t have tells and he doesn’t let information slip accidentally. He’s too smart and too controlled. He lays breadcrumbs. In hindsight, the flower was a *taunt*. How long has he been planning this?

“Anticipating more than planning, precisely,” Riddle closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. When he opens them, his pupils are blown wide. “I knew you’d react like this.”

“Like what?” Harry asks. He needs more information immediately, and if Riddle feels like monologuing like a good villain, he’s all for it.

“Everything I throw at you, you somehow come back swinging. Does nothing phase you?”

“Sure, it does,” Harry says, but panic is unproductive. No one has ever accused him of being paralysed by indecision. He’s of the any-action-is-a-good-start school of thought. Impulsive, Hermione calls it. Even now, realising that Riddle could know *anything* – every tactic and strength Harry had thought he’d been so cleverly hiding; every private thought; every secret training session where Harry let loose because he was the only champion present – Harry isn’t panicking. He is adjusting his plans. Step 1 is not to plan while Riddle is in his head. Step 2 pending.

The uncertainty of knowing which parts Riddle has seen is almost worse than knowing for sure. He hopes Riddle hasn’t seen what Harry dreamt the other night.

“I could find it,” Riddle says and that’s a real smile because it’s at least 70% threat.

And Harry knows Riddle clued into Harry’s attraction pretty much immediately. It didn’t bother Harry, but it’s a bit different imagining Riddle knows exactly *why* and *how often* and in *high definition*. He might not. Harry thinks he would’ve noticed if Riddle went rifling around in his head on the regular, at least in the last couple weeks, but he’s not *certain*. And, honestly, Riddle wouldn’t have to dig very deep. Whenever he’s around, he tends to settle in the forefront of Harry’s attention.

Harry flushes deep red. Oh yeah, Riddle *definitely* knows how often he gets Harry hot and bothered. That’s mortifying, but Riddle already knows and there’s no point pretending otherwise. What matters is what Harry plans to do about this. He needs to figure out what Riddle knows and stop him learning anything else.

Harry puts the feelings aside. He clears his mind, though he doesn’t think it’s entirely effective. It must do something, because Riddle’s brow wrinkles – as it has every time Harry has used occlumency to focus. Merlin’s balls, he feels oblivious.

“Please don’t,” Riddle says.

Harry’s thoughts almost stumble, so great is his incredulity. Riddle will kill him for fame and fortune. Harry is not going to let him have free access to his head just because Riddle wants it. No matter how shapely his arse looks in his uniform.

Riddle's lips twitch.

Harry closes his eyes, indulges briefly in wishing for the sweet relief of death, and then stows the fresh embarrassment away with the rest. He raises his defences.

"Don't what? What are you–?" Bellatrix looks between them, brow furrowed. But, well, she is missing half the conversation.

Riddle briefly flicks his eyes to her.

Anger will be swift to follow her confusion, Harry knows. It is yet another reason to retreat. The books and newspapers jump into his hands in his eagerness. Harry gathers them into a wobbly stack and looks around for his scroll of notes.

Riddle is rolling the scroll idly. He does not offer it. "You'll keep this information to yourself," he says. It is not a question.

Harry hesitates because, no, he won't. Riddle must know he won't, when his friend's lives are on the line. Legilimency is bad enough during training, but it could be lethal in the arena. If just one person in the alliance doesn't know occlumency, none of their plans would stay secret. They'll need to learn specialised befuddlement wards or Riddle will sense when their minds are nearby. They need to start planning and preparing immediately.

"Unlikely," Harry replies and braces himself for Riddle to threaten him, perhaps, make him swear silence. Harry's mind is already generating loopholes. Getting around a vow wouldn't be the problem – the problem would be the other consequences. Riddle doesn't forgive breaches of trust. Hermione only threatened to spill one of his secrets and he cut her out of his life for years. Now he's got a licence to kill. Harry doesn't want to piss Riddle off. He should be more worried about giving a terrible enemy a vendetta, but it's the broken trust that twists his insides the most.

Riddle offers the scroll and a deal. "Hermione only."

Harry doesn't take it. Hermione is the only one he isn't worried about. She's picking up occlumency faster than Harry – he trusts her to handle herself even if she doesn't know to look out for this specific threat. "Who's to say it's my business if my other friends start learning occlumency?" he tries.

Bellatrix giggles. She briefly attempts to muffle it behind a hand, and

then not even that.

“You are starting to really annoy me, Bella,” Riddle says mildly.

She cuts herself off as if he’d slapped her.

Riddle waves his fingers, as if the catch the lost thread of conversation. “If anyone wants to learn occlumency, then it’s no one’s business why they might need it,” he counters the counteroffer.

Harry can tell anyone to learn so long as he keeps Riddle’s name out of it. There must be a catch, but Harry can’t see a better offer coming. He takes the scroll. It’s a deal.

…

Worry keeps Harry tossing and turning all night, only to fall asleep in the grey dawn hours and wake later than he’d meant to. He is the last one down to breakfast. He responds to the chorus of greetings distractedly, and Hermione’s concerned “Are you all right, Harry?” with a bit more vigour, but it doesn’t fool her.

“You should learn occlumency,” he tells everyone.

“What?” Hermione blinks. “Did Professor Snape tell you…?”

“No,” Harry says. To the rest of them, he explains, “Snape’s been teaching me and Hermione occlumency since Fleur turned out to be so scary.” He gives her a nod and Delacour, flattered, bares her perfect teeth in a grin that makes Harry want to shuffle away. “You should all learn it.”

“Why?” Krum asks.

“I can’t tell you,” Harry says. “Trust me, you’ll need it.”

“You can’t tell us?” Roger raises an eyebrow.

“No,” Harry repeats levelly. Overthinking the situation all night at least helped him work out a plan. “But I’m going to volunteer to spend more quality time with Snape. That should tell you have seriously I’m taking it.”

Cedric looks alarmed.

“Ah,” Trelawny says knowingly. She straightens under half a dozen expectant gazes. “You bear a grave secret. It is dangerous knowledge,

and you balance how much you can reveal on a knife edge. You must be cautious, for I sense a secret may turn the tide."

"Yes, thank you, we could deduce as much for ourselves," Roger says.

Delacour turns a hard look on him and he mumbles an apology. Trelawny is unphased, and haughtily, she says, "Divination homes in on the events which will leave an imprint on the universe. You will find information uncovered by such magic is more important that by mundane means."

"Is it, though?" Hermione bristles, and she is much less deterred by Delacour's warning. She continues only a tad politer, "What matters in this instance is whether the information is right or wrong. Information can't be more correct just because the source is divination."

"I have heard occlumency is very time consuming," Krum interrupts. "You believe it is worth this? Worth more than duelling experience?"

"Yes," Harry says.

"Then I will speak to Karkaroff," Krum says.

"It does take a while," Amelia says. All eyes turn on her. She shrugs. "I know the basics already. My family are in the DMLE."

"Can you help me?" Görder asks.

Amelia squeezes her hand. "Sure."

"You missed the conversation, earlier," Cedric tells Harry. "There's a new decree. Something along the lines of the High Inquisitor inspecting mentor training to ensure high teaching standards. Fleur was saying Umbridge sat in on her personal training with her mentor."

Delacour breaks her glare at Hermione to grimace. "That woman does not like Madam Maxime any more than she likes me."

"What can Umbridge do about it? Sack her?"

"We don't know," Cedric says.

"Right," Harry says. He's not looking forward to it. As funny as it would be to see McGonagall bulldoze through Umbridge's bullshit, he's not sure how the cards would fall with Snape. There's a chance he and Umbridge will gang up on Harry, and they're each unpleasant enough alone.

Harry is distracted from his thoughts by brown eyes. Riddle quirks an eyebrow and tilts his head toward the head table. Harry starts to grimace in commiseration before he remembers why this is a bad idea– eye contact makes legilimency easier. He hastily looks away. Something wary and frustrated churns in his gut.

…

Harry didn't realise how obvious his involvement with Riddle was to everyone else until people comment on the lack. They are accustomed to Harry keeping one eye on Riddle whenever he is in the room, and Riddle checking if Harry saw him master the latest deadly spell or potion. They saw caution and posturing and slotted Harry and Riddle into the understandable role of rivals. Which is why, Harry realises in hindsight, they probably did not understand what in the world was going on when, out of nowhere, he had dinner with his enemy while arguing like they'd been friends for years. And after the dinner, they kept talking in lessons, in the common room, in passing. Harry circled Riddle warily, until Riddle drew him into his orbit.

Cedric leans over from his and Roger's workstation. "Are you okay, Harry?"

"Yeah, of course. Why do you ask?" Harry looks at his runes in case he's missed something, but he still has all his fingers and nothing is on fire so it can't be too dire.

"You don't seem yourself." Cedric's eyes dart to Riddle. Harry tracks his gaze, catches himself halfway and jolts back.

Cedric is right to be surprised. Harry has *never* avoided Riddle's gaze. Harry couldn't make it more obvious if he tried. "Ah, that."

Cedric scans his face, a crease between his brows. If Harry seems a bit vacant, it isn't because he is daydreaming – he's occluding, and it's taking a lot of concentration. Eventually, Cedric says. "I'm here if you want to talk. If you're hurt or confused."

Harry chest swells with affection. Cedric is a good bloke. If only Harry had better taste. "Thanks, Ced. I really am fine, though."

"Okay. Offer is still open."

A moment later, Harry overhears Roger whisper, "Do you reckon he's figured out he likes Tom? Having a bit of crisis?"

Harry closes his eyes. Apparently, all the mortification has yet to be wrung out of this situation, because now his allies think he is embroiled in teenage romantic angst. Denying it is not going to help his case.

“We’ve all been there,” Cedric replies quietly.

Roger hums. “I mean, a crisis is fair enough. Mortal enemies and all. My crushes weren’t nearly that complicated.”

A few hours later, Harry once again feels eyes on the side of his head. He refuses to look. It is the third lesson he and Riddle have shared today. Harry would suspect Riddle is following Harry for his own amusement, except Harry *knows* he is.

“Is he bothering you?” Delacour asks out of the blue.

“What?” Harry says in surprise more than anything. Delacour is still standoffish, particularly with the boys.

“That one is interested in you. His attention – is it unwanted?”

“Er,” Harry says, because *no*, but *yes*, and for very different reasons. “It’s complicated.”

It’s enough for Fleur. She becomes his buffer. It’s nice – not because Harry fears what Riddle will do if Harry is alone – but it’s nice to know he has her support. She might just see it as returning a favour, but she’ll be there if he needs her.

She doesn’t comment on what she thinks is going on. None of them do. Whether that’s because they think they already know, or they pity Harry too much to bring it up, he couldn’t say.

…

The one class Riddle doesn’t attend, Bellatrix, unfortunately, does.

Harry is annoyed. He wanted to push his limits in this session, as they’re learning self-transfiguration for camouflage – turning themselves into furniture and trees and such – which seems, oh, *somewhat important*. He won’t do it with Bellatrix watching, and even if she weren’t, Riddle could still pluck the memory from the trainers’ unguarded minds. Harry will have to remember what he can and try it alone later, maybe with McGonagall which would cut into her planned schedule lessons.

Bellatrix won't stop shooting smirks his way, and what bothers Harry more than her attitude is that he doesn't know why she's so smug. It is not because he's managing to be moderately incompetent at transfiguration, since these particular smug looks started after she witnessed his chat with Riddle. It must be about him somehow, but it can't be because of the flirting. No doubt the rest of the Supremacists think Riddle is merrily stringing Harry along, but Bellatrix should know Harry hasn't had the wool pulled over his eyes.

Right?

Harry wants answers and he thinks he knows how to get them. Riddle regularly tells Bellatrix to stop talking. When she's angry, she has poor impulse control. She's prone to bragging. She'll say more than Riddle wants her to. How convenient, then, that Harry angers her just by breathing.

He only has to let her catch him looking a few times, she goes tense with each reminder of his existence, and when she's good and fuming, Harry has a breakthrough with his transfiguration. He looks up and grins. It is the catalyst.

"Widdle Potter thinks he stands a chance against us," Bellatrix sneers. "Just because he can do sixth year transfiguration."

"And fifth year. Sometimes even fourth," he says glibly.

Her wild eyes narrow. "It won't save you. Even if you're smart enough to be a coward and hide as a tree the entire time, I'll find you. I'll burn the whole forest to the ground."

"Uh huh."

She growls. "You have no idea what you're up against."

Now we're getting somewhere. Harry shrugs. "I'm pretty sure I do."

She'll correct him. She is determined to always be right. Sure enough, "We're better than you in every conceivable way. Strength and magic runs through my veins. Yours is diluted by *dirt*."

An absurd statement. Riddle is stronger than the rest of the Supremacists combined, but no, Harry can't say that. He wants Bellatrix to defend Riddle, not herself. "By your own standards, I'm stronger than Riddle. I'm better than at least one of you."

“You are *nothing*. Tom could eat you alive.” Does she mean it metaphorically or literally? Harry isn’t sure. She needs another prod.

“I’m not scared of his special skills.”

Bellatrix bears her nasty grin. “You should be. He is gifted. He was inherently stronger at age eleven than you could hope to be if you trained for a thousand years.”

Riddle may be a born legilimens – rarer and stronger than someone who has learned the skill. Legilimency is dangerous, it explains her fear of him, but why the reverence? There’s more. There’s *definitely* more.

“Enough talking,” the head trainer cuts in with a wary look at Bellatrix. “Separate sides of the room, both of you. Get back to your work.”

…

“Hello, Harry.”

“Hi, Riddle,” Harry tells his collarbone. “I don’t suppose you just want the dumplings?”

Riddle does not. “You’re avoiding me.” Harry, and possibly Hermione, are the only ones a dinner who know Riddle well enough to tell he is amused.

“Just your eyes,” Harry says, and hopes his allies are paying attention. Besides, it’s true. He’ll mitigate the risks until he gets better at passive occlumency, but he won’t shun Riddle entirely. He still wants to know how many secrets Riddle got out of his head. He pats the bench, taunting, “You’re welcome to sit if you want.”

Riddle wouldn’t dare. The Supremacists would skin him.

Apparently, Riddle would dare. “Thank you.” At least, with Riddle beside him it will be harder to accidentally meet his eyes. Harry shores up his occlumency anyway.

Riddle greets the rest, treating the littlest ones graciously and somehow avoiding any condescension, winning giggles from that quarter, then he turns back to Harry. “You’re quiet, Harry. Are you shy in crowds?”

Cedric frowns, “Don’t tease him, Riddle.”

Riddle doesn’t look away from Harry. Harry knows he isn’t teasing, light-hearted though it sounded. He is checking boundaries, asking if he can behave the same as they do in private, while being circumspect so as not to let on that they *have* been meeting in private. Harry takes a big bite of food to buy time. He considers it. He weighs how the Ministry could misconstrue the flirting, how his friends and family might judge him. He imagines if a stranger had witnessed any of their previous encounters and considers if the prospect makes him uncomfortable. Besides lingering disgruntlement about people minding things that are none of their business, which is directed more towards the viewing audience than his allies, who have a genuine stake in Harry’s relationships with other champions during the Games, and the possible ramifications of being found breaking Umbridge’s rules, Harry finds he doesn’t mind.

“I’m not shy, no,” Harry says, eyes flicking to the notice board where the decrees are pinned.

“Oh? Now, that is intriguing, darling,” Riddle says, because he can’t wrap an arm around Harry’s waist without earning detention, so he must lean on other ways of being obnoxious.

Harry does not find the name endearing – he finds Riddle being an utter shit endearing. It is a subtle difference which is probably lost on his friends, who only see a grin.

Everyone knows how skilled Riddle is in a duel by now, how dangerous an enemy he is – and he is an enemy, because a Supremacist could be nothing else. They look appropriately alarmed.

“He’s making it sound like we’re in a relationship because it’s freaking you out and he thinks that’s funny,” Harry explains.

Riddle shrugs elegantly. “There isn’t any other entertainment around here.”

“Should we expect any more visitors looking for something to do?” Harry glances warily over at Bellatrix. She’s looking a bit green – that’d be the jealousy. It isn’t strange for Riddle to pass over her company if there is something sufficiently interesting, but he’ll usually put in the work to placate her first.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Riddle says, and proceeds to be the perfect dinner guest. He doesn’t ignore the group in favour of Harry

and Hermione. He makes polite conversation and asks about everyone's training without prying questions. He is cordial. The young ones are entertained. Cedric and Roger look more and more like they expect Riddle to bite them.

Roger can't get away fast enough after the meal.

Cedric lingers by Harry in the great hall, and then again in the common room. Harry feels the siren song of his bed but doesn't bother heading for the dorms.

"Harry, can we talk?" Cedric asks.

Harry slumps into an armchair by the fire. "Sure."

Cedric rubs his neck awkwardly. "It's. Ah. How you feel about Riddle…"

"We're not together."

Cedric holds up his hands in surrender. "Okay, if you say so, I believe you. But – you clearly like him."

Harry scrunches his nose. The word is too small, but how do you describe the feeling of simultaneous admiration and fear? He supposes 'like' is no more or less insufficient than the alternatives. "I guess so."

"We will have to fight him. We'll have to kill him, or he will kill us."

"Yeah." Harry takes a deep breath, feeling it ache in his ribs.

"We can't do it without you. I think Riddle knows that," Cedric says, painfully gentle. "You have to consider he could be playing a long game here, softening you up."

"I'm aware." All the fuss about the duel, Riddle is making could be a smokescreen, while he sidles closer to Harry. Harry can only keep the possibility firmly in mind, keep an eye out for any traps, because he can't convince himself not to find Riddle attractive. There are some things magic can't do. "There's not a lot I can do about that."

"You could distance yourself."

Harry grimaces. Instinctively, viscerally, he wants to shout down the idea. He doesn't want to stop seeing Riddle, but what he wants may not be very smart, so he takes a few breaths and an echo of his mother's voice reminds him to think.

Cedric catches the reaction, and his concern deepens. “Don’t fall in love with him, Harry. Merlin, please, don’t put yourself through that. Stop while you still can.”

“It doesn’t matter. I can still fight him.” Harry forcibly relaxes his jaw. Cedric doesn’t deserve to be shouted at. He’s being a good friend, even if he’s making Harry angry. “I don’t love him. I’ve known him a few weeks, Cedric. By the time we get to the arena, it will only be two months. That’s nothing.”

“You know time can’t measure connection.”

“Fine. Even if we measure it by the volume of shared experiences, it’s not just him and me stuck here, is it? We’re all in this shit together,” Harry says. “I’ve lived with Hermione for six years. She’s a sister to me. She’s been with me through every struggle. You were there too, the last couple years. I’ve got so much more with you and Hermione on top of these Games. I’ll pick you guys.”

“As long as you recognise you’ll have to,” Cedric says with a resigned sort of sadness. “You’re going to lose him. He’s going to betray you. And if you survive, you’ll lose him again.”

Harry’s hands twitch, almost reaching on their own accord to shove Cedric away. It’s instinct now, a trained response to the feeling of being punched.

Stop saying it! Harry wants to shout.

He may have, perhaps, underestimated his attachment. Cedric is right, Harry could still cut this off. He’s not sure it’d do much good, though. It hurts just thinking about it. It’ll hurt more in the arena, he knows. More again, after the Games if Riddle is dead and gone or alive and furious.

“I like talking to him. If I’m going to die in a few weeks. Or if he’s going to – if this is the last chance I get – Cedric. I want to take it.”

Which makes the legilimency obstacle even more galling.

…

It does not take Harry long to find the catch. There is the reason Riddle didn’t care if the other champions try to teach themselves occlumency.

“Do not be absurd,” Snape sneers. “It is nigh impossible to learn effective occlumency without a master to temper one’s defences.”

Not only will they fail; they will waste their time trying.

Harry changes tacks. “Shouldn’t you teach our allies, though?”

“Get it through your head, boy – this is a competition.”

“Teams can win.”

“If you think the gamemakers cannot stop you, you are gravely mistaken.”

“Right, the gamemakers will target our weaknesses. Say Delacour turns on us, or they put a full-blooded veela in the arena, or anything else which can influence our minds. If our allies are vulnerable to mental attacks, me and Hermione will be vulnerable to our allies. So, in a roundabout way, helping them is helping us.”

“I am glad you finally recognise what I’ve been telling you all along – the vast majority of them are a liability.”

“They needn’t be. If you taught them –”

“Easier to simply *keep secret information to yourself*.”

Harry clenches his jaw and crosses another approach off his list of options. He hasn’t got many left.

“Why the sudden interest?” Snape asks, and the suspicion that has been lurking in his eyes comes to the fore. “You were whining about wanting more duelling practice just yesterday. I doubt you have found some mythical fount of wisdom in the intervening hours. No, far more likely you found *trouble*.”

“I’m not in trouble,” Harry says.

“Why do I doubt that.”

“Maybe you’re unreasonably paranoid. Sir.”

Snape stands abruptly, bracing his hands on their shared desk to loom over Harry. “Or maybe,” he says softly, furiously, “I know that you are an impenitent busybody. Always minding everyone else’s business, solving your little mysteries. Did someone catch you at it?”

“I’m not being blackmailed.”

“Really. Because I cannot conceive of many more reasons you would fail to tell me about a threat.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Do not lie to me.” Snape’s nostrils flair. “You went prying or snooping about. You discovered something which spooked you. Now, is it something Umbridge is planning? A broader plot in the Ministry? Or one of the champions?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Snape doesn’t let it go. He is a dog with a bone, and he gets more snappish with each failed attempt to pry an answer out of Harry. Harry hadn’t realised Snape had mellowed over the past few weeks until his full sour mood returns.

Snape certainly doesn’t limit himself to asking nicely – he goes digging during their occlumency lessons. He doesn’t find answers, and that’s down to a mix of luck and skill but Harry will take what he can get. Harry has figured out some redirection techniques in the past weeks; Snape doesn’t know precisely what he’s looking for; and he’s not yet annoyed enough to do permanent damage. He’ll either reach that point or find the answers. He’s getting close.

He discovered Harry’s feelings for Riddle, and called Harry an idiot. Then Snape discovered Harry was sneaking around with Riddle, alone, and wondered if Harry is, among other things, suicidal. Harry is risking Umbridge’s retribution for something which is objectively detrimental to his survival. If Snape found out Harry is keeping Riddle’s secrets from his mentor. Well. Harry thinks Riddle would appreciate the irony. Snape is the only fully trained occlumens Harry knows, which makes him the only person Harry could confide in without Riddle finding out unless Snape chose to dob Harry in. Which, if Harry admitted he is keeping Riddle’s secret, Snape might do as he gives up in despair and throws his lot in behind the Slytherins.

So Harry does not tell Snape. He hides, misleads, obfuscates the information. Necessity is a better teacher than Snape ever was, and Harry figures out how to jerry-rig his mental shields into a layered system. He redistributes his finite concentration to make stronger fortifications where it matters most. If it leaves parts of his mind comically open, fine. Let Riddle see how much Harry likes his arse, the embarrassment won’t kill him. Let Riddle see Harry has fast

reflexes, as long as he doesn't know how fast. Let him know Harry is an animagus, as long as he can't find out his shape.

It is a shortcut. It's no substitute for building up his strength at occlumency, but when exercising a new muscles strength necessarily comes with time. Harry will gradually protect more and more of his thoughts, and it will either be good enough in time or it won't.

For now, he hopes that if it's good enough to keep something important from Snape, it'll be good enough for Riddle. As Harry told Cedric, the time is counting down. It is week four, now. Their training is half over.

Week 4 day two

Chapter Summary

> Harry learns more than he ever wanted to know about Snape, then tries his hand at making an alliance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Wand away, Potter,” Snape says.

Harry hesitates. It might be a test. They are supposed to be duelling today – or that’s what Harry assumed Snape meant when he said Harry shouldn’t rest on his laurels and neglect his other lessons, after he successfully deflected ever-nastier mental attacks over the last few days.

Harry opens his mouth, and Snape shoots him a quelling look so icy his jaw snaps shut on its own accord. Then the sound of high heels proceeds a pink witch into the room and Harry closes his eyes on a silent groan.

Harry can follow Snape’s logic on the odd occasion he bases his decisions on reason instead of spite. Umbridge has come to spy, of course. Not for the Ministry, who need nothing more than their omnioculars, but for her preferred champions. She won’t get much intel out of occlumency training, and she won’t be able to tell how far Harry has progressed.

Snape doesn’t spare Umbridge a glance. He levels his wand at Harry, with the usual minimal warning, “Clear your mind. Legilimens!”

Sudden, smothering weight falls on Harry. His entire focus diverts to the threat, leaving him stiff, blind, and deaf. Pushing back is like brushing his psyche up against a wall of needles. The pain is a distraction – every wince lets Snape burrow deeper. Snape flicks through memories without much interest. Harry tries to lead him in circles around the harmless ones. It works, mostly. Snape doesn’t get to the core of him.

“Dismal,” is Snape’s verdict, because Harry has progressed from pathetic. “A shambled, uncoordinated defence. Again!”

Harry scrambles to brace himself.

“Hem hem,” Umbridge interrupts. “What is the point of this exercise?”

“I should think it obvious,” Snape says just on the wrong side of snide, never mind that he often scolds Harry for antagonising her. “Legilimens is a spell with somewhat *limited* applications.”

Umbridge gives a transparently fake titter. “You are teaching him occlumency, correct?”

“Correct,” Snape says slowly and clearly, as if talking to a first-year class of Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors. Not to better communicate, rather, to ensure the listener knows they are an utter imbecile and testing his patience.

“What is the anticipated martial application of occlumency for your champion?” Umbridge asks, speaking around Harry.

“Defensive precaution.”

“And you would consider a precaution worth such time and effort, balanced against other skills which might be taught?”

“I consider it *necessary*, given there is a part-veela champion.”

“Ah, we wouldn’t want him to lose his head over a pretty girl,” Umbridge says, scribbling. She mutters quite loudly, “At least you demonstrate the awareness to learn from your own mistakes.”

Snape stares Umbridge down, lip curling, more repulsed by her than anything he has scraped off the bottom of a cauldron.

“And what makes you qualified to teach occlumency?”

“Mastery of the mental arts, for a start. Is there a purpose to this line of questioning?” A sharp eyebrow demands she get to the point immediately.

Umbridge plasters on a salesman’s smile. “The Ministry are investing in our mentors this year to ensure we offer the highest quality of instruction. Our hand-selected trainers are second to none, of course, but we always strive to improve on excellence.”

“What is the form of this investment?” Snape asks a bit warily.

“A series of worldclass seminars on the latest effective teaching

methods and engaging workshops to practice applying what you've learned."

Snape looks like he's swallowed a lemon.

Harry imagines inane leaflets being foisted upon Snape, full of advice about teamwork and engagement and other buzz words, and barely contains a laugh.

Snape spots it. "Potter! That vacant expression better mean you've been shoring up your mental walls, not merely staring at the castle's. Legilimens!"

It hits like a bludger, because Snape is no stranger to taking his bad moods out on Harry, but Harry *has* been preparing and he does better this time. He heads Snape off at a few turns, and he's getting buoyed by his looming success when a stinging hex hits him in the gut. "Ow!"

The surprise is worse than the pain. A split second of inattention and Snape washes over his mind. Harry fights furiously but he hasn't got enough safe ground left for a strong foothold. Snape withdraws. "Pay attention to your surroundings!"

Harry rubs his stomach and glares.

"Someone could walk up to you and slit your throat and you wouldn't notice. I know I am asking a lot, but stretch your limited brainpower. Do try to think and use your eyes at the same time.

"Hem hem."

Snape raises an eyebrow. "I wonder how you intend to evaluate my mentoring skills if I am to spend the session answering your questions while Potter is left to twiddle his thumbs."

"And I wonder, Severus, about the amount of time you are spending on this skill."

"Alas, I am not blessed with a quick learner. It is my professional opinion the boy needs all the practice he can get."

"Well, let's see *how* professional." Umbridge flicks through pages and leaflets, then comes to a particular old and worn scroll and she looks up slyly. "Can you guarantee you have adhered to the guidelines for the Responsible Practice of Legilimency?"

Snape folds his hands into his robes. “Guidelines?”

Beady little eyes light up with unholy glee. “More akin to rules, really. Anyone found breaking them would face an inquiry. Have you not heard of them?”

Snape pauses long enough for Umbridge to mentally draft an infringement notice and award herself a commendation. Then he says, “Seeing as the guidelines had not been updated since 1864 before I rewrote them, I would appear to be in a minority of British people who even know they exist.”

Umbridge looks as if he’d slapped her.

Harry bites his lip. If he’s starting to appreciate Snape’s snark, the Stockholm must be setting in.

“Potter, again. Legilimens!”

Harry had used the brief interlude to get a shield in place and it works as at least a stumbling block, preventing Snape getting too deep. Some of Snape’s surface thoughts reflect off the shield, back at Harry, which is always a risk when a legilimens attempts to enter a prepared mind. Usually, Harry only gets a sense of Snape’s determination, scorn or some other flavour of disapproval, but Snape is hardly thinking about Harry at all. Harry thought Snape hated him. Clearly, Harry underestimated Snape’s capacity for loathing. Snape *despises* Umbridge. Even the pale reflection is staggering. Whatever Snape’s issue with her is, it is personal in a way his grudge against Harry – predominantly transferred from father to son, though Harry likes to think he’s earned some of Snape’s animosity on his own merits– isn’t.

Snape is a coiled, simmering pit of rage. It is an unpleasant, sticky feeling. Harry wants it away from him. He gets some traction, closes his mind, and Snape briefly loses his grip.

Harry bows over panting. A headache is starting to pound against his skull. Brilliant. It will be harder to focus for the next attack.

Umbridge wrinkles her nose at the sweat beading on his hairline. “Severus, how are you qualified to shape this… young man into a victor?”

“You tell me. Mentoring is certainly not *my* choice profession. I presume the Ministry drafts us because they recognise we have some relevant experience.”

“Oh, you have experience with the Games, of course, but you were not a victor,” Umbridge says pityingly. “You did not even get to the finale alone – it took three blood traitors to do the job of one Blood Supremacist. You were a survivor. Becoming the *last* survivor of your batch a decade later does not remedy your initial blunder, so by my measure, you fall rather short of some other mentors.”

Snape looks nothing so much as bored. “Like Lestrange or Karkaroff, I suppose?” His lip curls around their names. “You are quite right. Unlike them, I wouldn’t know how to instruct Potter to withstand a barrage of sponsor gifts. Although, I doubt he will suffer for the lack of instruction, at this point.” Snape glares at Harry.

Harry shrugs back. He has pissed off the sponsors, it’s done, there’s not much he can do about it at this point. If Snape would stop *going on about it*, they might do something productive instead.

Umbridge giggles. “Now, this is precisely why we are offering training for our substandard mentors! Otherwise, the Games could be construed as unfair.”

“Perish the thought,” Snape says, and Harry is starting to enjoy himself immensely. It is the schadenfreude kind, which is ruined as Umbridge tries to pull him back into the thick of it.

“Hem hem. How would you rank the effectiveness of Severus’s methods, Mr Potter?”

Harry sweeps sweaty hair out of his eyes. He has a choice. He can get Snape committed to the soul-grinding stone of bureaucracy curtesy of some governmental overseeing committee, maybe return a bit of the misery Snape has heaped on him. Harry wouldn’t even have to lie – Snape is a terrible teacher. He’s taught Harry at least one thing – the enemy of my enemy – and Harry knows who his enemy is.

“Well, weighing up all the metrics. Clarity of instruction, accuracy of advice, prioritisation of essential information, actionable feedback, knowledgeability, preparedness, engagement, helpfulness, approachability, er, punctuality.” Scraping the bottom of his list of adjectives because he’s not Hermione, Harry thinks long and hard, and says, “Five.”

“Five?” Umbridge repeats.

“On a scale.”

“A scale of what? One to a hundred? One to five?” She is getting impatient.

“Yes,” he says with a straight face. He is much better at the type of occlumency that aids with self-control. Control, yes. Restraint, no. He watches Umbridge’s pink bow wobble and wonders what it would take to make her vibrate in fury enough for it to fall off.

Umbridge takes a deep breath and persists. “Do you believe Professor Snape is an adequate mentor for you?”

“Yes,” Harry lies.

“Merely adequate,” Umbridge tuts, taking note. “Severus, I am enrolling you in the mentoring workshops. I know it will be a drain on your time, but it is for the greater good in the long run.”

“The *greater good*,” Snape echoes one of Minister Grindelwald’s favourite lines through gritted teeth. “Yes, anything for that.”

“Now, don’t pout. We must all make sacrifices to keep things running smoothly,” Umbridge chides. She circles them with deliberate steps. “Such a cynical attitude. It makes me wonder if your influence is partly responsible for the problems we’ve seen with this boy. He has such a terrible irreverent arrogance. He is not treating his selection as the honour and opportunity it is. Well, Mr Potter, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Can I get that listed as my cause of death?” Harry asks, aiming for guileless and hitting is squarely. But he really wouldn’t mind if it ended up on his tombstone. *Here lies Harry James Potter. His irreverence vexed a lot of people who thought rather too much of themselves.* “Unless I get eaten by a dragon. Not many people get to say they’ve done that.”

Umbridge stares at him. Then she readjusts her quill, “…scrambling his brains…”

“It is congenital, I’m afraid. I take no responsibility for that,” Snape says.

“Do you not?” Umbridge says lightly, and Harry has no idea where she’s going with it until she gets the proverbial shovel. “I recall a certain infatuation with the boy’s mother, and that kind of girl, well, they don’t have the same values instilled as proper young ladies, and mightn’t save themselves for marriage. Or take marriage vows seriously, even then.”

Snape stiffens in outrage. He is much quicker to react than Harry, who must run her words through his head several times to confirm that, yes, he did hear her insinuate his mum cheated on his dad with Snape for years, and that it is the *nature* of muggleborns to be *loose*.

Harry opens his mouth to insert his foot, but Umbridge has not finished digging. “I have wondered why you chose Mr Potter as your champion, even over your own House,” Harry jolts, the shock managing to penetrate his boiling anger, because this is fucking *news to him.* “You’re not worthy of Miss Black, of course, but Mr Riddle would have been suitable. Instead, you passed Mr Riddle over for a boy you profess to hate? It makes a witch suspicious, Severus, that there could be several Conflict-of-Interest forms you have not submitted.”

“Potter,” Snape spits, “is not my son.”

Umbridge eyes Harry up and down. “Proof is in order, I think. Mr Potter, you will take a paternity potion from Madam Pomfrey.”

It is a waste of time of course. Harry is more obviously James’ son than Lily’s, but the gossip rags aren’t interested in whether scandals are factual. It isn’t going to be pretty. Merlin, as if the sponsors weren’t set against him enough for being Bellatrix’s rival.

“Is there any actual training you need to observe to finish your inspection?” Snape asks acidly. “So you might continue your fantasy novel writing elsewhere?” He appears too angry to even look at her, choosing instead to glare at Harry.

“What else do you teach him?” Umbridge says. She paces around the room. Snape ignores her.

“Politics, strategy and duelling.”

Umbridge will not accept Snape’s refusal to look at her. She steps in between them, so Snape must meet her eyes or back down. “Ah, yes, I must inspect how you duel. It is a dangerous activity, after all, and the Ministry has a responsibility to ensure Mr Potter is safe in your presence.”

“As you wish,” Snape says, still avoiding her eyes. He taps his wand impatiently until Umbridge gets out of the way.

“You do not set up protective wards?” Umbridge says, circling them.

“I prefer a more realistic setting which allows for spell recoil,” Snape says. “If Minerva and Miss Granger are spectating, I expect them to fend for themselves.”

Umbridge stops somewhere behind Harry, unavoidably in Snape’s field of view. Harry’s back prickles uncomfortably. Umbridge revels in their discomfort. But Snape – his dark eyes suddenly glitter with satisfaction. Harry has a flashback to being caught after curfew and losing 50 points for Gryffindor. His intuition perks up and he pays more attention. Snape’s stance is subtly off. He is aiming slightly too far to the left. If he’s not careful, he’ll hit Umbridge.

She deserves it.

Harry decides to practice dodging. He wouldn’t want to show off in front of Umbridge, after all.

Umbridge does not remain to observe for long. Snape isn’t stupid, and it isn’t obvious he’s targeting her. He restrains himself to the occasional, plausibly accidental pot-shot, and otherwise turns the room into a warzone. There is not a single safe spot left.

Harry loses track of Umbridge amongst the flames and blasting charms, but where the smoke clears less than a minute into the duel, there is no sign of her but a lingering scent of burnt hair.

Snape dials down the theatrics and sets in on Harry with a vengeance. Harry fights back in earnest. It is not the ideal time to work on a relatively new skill, but Harry does it anyway. He can cast protego wandlessly, with his left hand, but managing the coordination to integrate it into a duel – that is another level entirely. At first, Harry found himself alternating left- and right-hand casting, which was no faster than regular casting and less powerful. No good enough. But he has practiced until he can summon it with barely a thought, until it’s instinct. Today, it works. He casts protego and confrigo simultaneously. It throws off Snape’s rhythm; where Snape expects him to shield of dodge, Harry is already returning an offensive spell.

But Snape is adaptable. He switches exclusively to dark curses which will go straight through a protego. Harry’s oppilo shield is getting stronger, faster, but not fast enough to block all curses.

Harry is disarmed the first time when he is caught in the edge of a whirlwind hex and thrown arse over teakettle. He hears his wand clatter somewhere nearby, and he summons it back, but has to roll away from a bone-breaker before it returns. He gets back to his feet.

He is seeing double, so he alternates his aim between the two Snapes and judges which one is angrier. The real Snape gets more irritated by shoddy aim than Harry trying to curse him.

The fourth time Harry is disarmed, he is hanging by his ankles from the ceiling, he can still feel the effects of the reverse-animagus spell Snape pre-emptively hit him with. Snape must have anti-summon spells on his pockets because Harry's wand and glasses are thoroughly out of reach.

The blurry shape of his mentor is throwing progressively nastier hexes his way. Snape is casting silently, only speaking to heckle, and Harry can't see well enough to judge the wand movement, but he knows the spells are getting stronger because his wandless protego is starting to struggle. He started with easy spells to taunt Harry but he's losing patience with this game and soon it is going to hurt.

Harry has exhausted his tricks. He can't *finite* whatever spell Snape has strung him up with. Snape simply blocks his disarming spells and the mild jinxes he can manage and the desk Harry banishes at him. A lumos doesn't accomplish much when Harry has nothing to follow up with. The blasting curse is beyond his skills, as is conjuration or transfiguration, but after this he's adding it to his list to learn wandlessly.

Harry's protego wavers against what he's fairly sure is a balding hex. The spells have taken a turn from the painful to the embarrassing.

"You're enjoying this," Harry accuses.

Snape denies it. "Whenever did I give you the impression I find your ineptitude amusing, Potter?"

But he must be lying. Why else would he want to mentor Harry, if not for the opportunity to torment him?

"Should've seen if I could get Umbridge to book you into the workshops twice," Harry mutters.

The next spell is about as vicious as Harry expected, punching straight through his shield and skimming a burning line down his back where he dodged out of the way with a sit-up. He relaxes his trembling abs with a huff. He can't do that too many more times. For one, Snape will probably aim higher.

Harry waves his hand, recasting his shield.

But Snape intends the next lesson to be from words, not bruises.

“Umbridge wants you dead. It was forefront in her mind. She does not want you to be able to defend yourself from Delacour or resist interrogation in the arena. She wants to force you back to the duelling salles where the other champions can watch. So she’ll take me out of the picture. This, you idiot, is what happens when the Ministry does not want you to win. I hope provoking them was very satisfying.”

“Of course, it’s *my* fault you’re in remedial mentoring classes,” Harry says. He sways sideways this time, though not far enough. His ears start growing at an alarming rate. Harry tries to forget, in these moments, that his humiliation is being broadcast across the nation.

“Listen to me, Potter. I’m sure you can hear me,” Snape sneers. Harry glares. His ears have grown halfway to the floor. “You will work hard. You will focus. You will learn what I am teaching you. You will thwart her plans. You are going to survive – I will accept no less. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal.”

Snape flicks his wand. Harry plummets and barely gets his arms up in time to prevent another trip to Madam Pomfrey. He gets tangled in his ears while Snape stands over him.

Harry considers how much he hates Umbridge and everything she stands for, and weighs it against Snape with the last few minutes added to his tally. She’s still ahead.

…

“Did the broadcast show how Umbridge carried on during my session with Snape earlier?” Prongs bounds from the Room, carrying the message. Harry reclines back on the lounge and waits.

“If you mean she was talking shit and ordered a paternity potion, yes,” Padfoot says. “You have to know, Harry, even if it turns out Snape’s your father, it won’t change how we feel about you – you’re still our family and we love you.”

Harry laughs into the empty room. But Sirius’s voice did not crook up in the end, and if Sirius is somewhere on the continent slapping his knee because he is always the first to laugh at his jokes, Harry can’t see it. Harry casts another patronus. “Wait – you *are* joking, right? Because I’ve already got the results, and it was obviously negative.”

“The broadcast didn’t show the results.”

Harry rubs his forehead. “So the Ministry is going to leave everyone in suspense and kick up a scandal, until the sponsors are thorough put out. Lovely. Wait, hang on – I can see the general public getting caught up in this drama, but you were there, why the hell did you take it even remotely seriously?”

The thing about a conversation through patronuses is there is a delay. Plenty to of time to think, and double think, and get a bad feeling about it.

“You know Snape and Lily were friends,” Padfoot says, “and I told you the three of them had a bit of a falling out at the end of their Games.” Harry snorts, because that is how Sirius had phrased it when explaining to an eleven-year-old why his potions professor didn’t like him. It wasn’t until Harry was thirteen that Sirius told him ‘falling out’ was short for ‘state sponsored attempted murder’. “Well, Snape and Lily didn’t cut all contact afterwards, that’s just how they made it look. They never even crossed eyes in the classroom, but they started meeting up in secret as soon as we returned for sixth year. Might’ve even made up over the holidays, I don’t know.”

Harry’s eyebrows shoot up. “I’m adding that as another point on dad’s side.” Lily was no pushover. She wouldn’t have forgiven a true betrayal, certainly not in a matter of months.

“You would, brat,” Padfoot huffs. “I still say I knew James better than anyone. I could tell when he was acting. He was shocked when Snape turned on them at the cup – he thought they were going to die. If it really was all part of a plan, then James wasn’t in on it. Lily neither. She was crying and– just. Merlin, Harry, never watch the footage. They didn’t want you to see it.”

“I won’t,” Harry reassures him.

“I – they almost died. They only survived because the greedy bastard couldn’t wait to finish them off before he got his slimy hands on the cup.”

And that, there, is Harry’s second point to his dad in favour of Sirius. All he knows, since he started duelling Snape, is that man is lethal, and if he was trying to kill Lily and James, he wouldn’t have stopped short at injuring them. But Harry doesn’t want to get into that again.

“Was it the same with dad – did he keep meeting Snape, too?”

“Merlin, no,” Padfoot says. He clears his throat, and the waver in his voice almost disappears. “They were adversaries before, and they wanted nothing to do with each other after. It got less antagonistic – which was weird, since Snape tried to kill him. But it was all complicated because they probably owed each other several life debts and neither of them liked to acknowledge it. They avoided each other.”

“Even after mum and dad started dating?”

“*Especially* after they started dating,” Sirius says. “Snape and Lily still didn’t stop meeting up. James was *not* happy when we found out – unhappy with us, I mean, because we told him Lily was cheating and we weren’t very nice about it, but, well, what else were we supposed to think? It never made sense to me – why keep a secret if you’ve got nothing to be ashamed of? Now, I’m certainly not saying Lily went behind James’s back – James always said he knew exactly what was going on, and he trusted Lily, and he said that Snape and Lily were just friends.”

Which means Sirius doesn’t know what was going on. Harry doesn’t want to speculate – or think about his mum and Snape in the same sentence, period – and he’s never going to get an answer. There’s probably only one person alive who knows, and there is no way Harry is asking him. “Why didn’t you tell me this before, when I asked you for everything you knew about Snape?”

“I guess I didn’t want to ruin your memory of your parents. I don’t want you to think badly of them.”

Harry pinches the bridge of his nose. Sirius deals with problems as they come; he prefers not to think about them until he can’t ignore it anymore. He does not plan ahead. Harry does, so really Harry should’ve seen this coming. “For future reference, the next time I’m worried about someone sabotaging me over a personal vendetta, tell me the full story of the vendetta so I have all the information to work with.”

“Right, yeah. I’m sorry. You probably need to know now. I should’ve warned you that if reporters go digging, they’re going to find enough suspicious activity to get tongues wagging. So just – brace yourself, and don’t pay the gossip much mind when you make it out of the arena.”

When he survives. Sirius has been letting it slip more and more. Harry

is worried he has been hanging onto that conviction to get through each day, to the point Sirius is starting to believe in the certainty. If Harry dies, he doesn't know what Sirius will do. Harry wishes he could message Remus. He takes a deep breath. "Who is this 'we' who found out? How many people know?"

"We, as in the Marauders, did some sleuthing. Well, mainly Peter – he was always the best at sniffing out secrets." Harry struggles to put a face to the name of the last Marauder, the one who drifted apart without James to glue the group together. Or maybe the long hours at Pettigrew's fancy Ministry job were to blame. It must've been hard to connect when he spent all day doing something that no one, namely Sirius, was particularly interested in. "So it was just us, but then James sort of told everyone."

"What? *Why*?"

"Yep. Said the three of them were the best of mates. Crowed it to the rooftops. I thought he'd lost his bloody marbles. Because Yaxley – he was the head gamemaker before Crouch senior – anyway, Yaxley tried to blackmail James, said James would have to throw his support behind the Party if he wanted to keep Snape and Lily's thing quiet."

"So he blew it wide open. Well, that's one way to handle it," Harry mutters to himself.

"Even when it got out that Snape and Lily had been sneaking around together, James put up a big fuss to draw the heat off them," Padfoot continues. "You know what he was like – he went straight after the Ministry, made the Games look like a joke. Lost the Potter seat on the Wizengamot over it. Snape did *not* appreciate it, ungrateful git, and that's when they had their second little falling out."

"Sirius. You *definitely* should've told me about this, too."

"I didn't know how to explain it without… you know." The awkward bits. "I'm telling you now?"

Harry sighs. "Is there anything else?"

"Not while we were at school. I'm not sure if Lily and Snape kept meeting up after. I never saw anything, and James didn't talk about it much."

Padfoot disappears, nothing else to say. Harry just processes for a while. Eventually, he summons another patronus. "Why did Snape

choose to mentor me?"

Padfoot is also slow in reappearing. "I don't know, Harry."

…

The stark lack of Riddle's presence in the past few days left Harry at a bit of a loss at all the free time. He caught up with the research he'd been putting off, secluded himself in a classroom each day to practice the spells he hadn't wanted to master in front of the Supremacists, and still found time to follow up with Ganz and Penchev. Ganz hasn't warmed to the idea of an alliance in the interim, quite the contrary.

"We have conditions," Ganz says, crossing her arms. "We won't ally with Krum, Ivankova, Diggory or Davies."

Right, because they're purebloods. Harry has to check, because their issue with it is still new and foreign, "And you don't have a problem with Amelia Bones?"

"She is young and nowhere near our level. She will not be able to claim credit for our achievements, and I am sure there is some easier duties she could manage to make her useful."

Harry takes a breath and puts that aside for the moment. "Okay. So as I understand it, you are proposing we swap them for you."

"Nikul and I are worth more than the three of them."

In skill? Undoubtedly. In reliability? These two are strangers. Harry would sooner trust the people he knows, even Krum – new acquaintance he may be, he has at least shown his principles by standing up to Bellatrix.

"I would rather not choose between you. I want to make the strongest group possible, and more is obviously better," Harry says. If this is to be a negotiation, he wants to make his position clear.

"Too many. Our mentors say it is suicide," Penchev murmurs. His words are barely distinguishable and once they're out, his mouth seals shut.

"Bigger groups attract too much trouble. They are a target," Ganz says. "The strongest groups are six or seven people. It would be eight with us in your group, minus the purebloods. Perhaps still too many, but I think we would lose some early."

As if misplacing keys. It is still jarring to hear people talk that way. Harry suspects it always will be. Each week he hears it from more champions trying to emotionally distance themselves from the inevitable. And, well, Harry understands why they may need to do it, to protect themselves.

He tries a pragmatic argument. “The purebloods could be an advantage, though. Krum will get lots of sponsor gifts.”

“That you think he will share with you? N’yet. It is not worth it,” Ganz shakes her head. “You do not understand what it will be like. We have been in school with Krum for years. When he started playing Quidditch, if the team wins, he is the one credited with victory. If they lose, it is the halfblood keeper’s fault.”

Harry opens his mouth to admit the points balance in Quidditch does make the seeker more important than the other players in some situations, and that keepers are far more scrutinised because it is easier for non-players to see their mistakes, as he has pointed out to Ron time and time again. Not to say prejudice cannot be a factor, only this instance it might not be the main cause. He has been spoiled for nuanced discussions recently.

But while he is mustering his arguments, Ganz soldiers on. “You should see our headmaster fawn over him. It is nauseating. Just because he is good on a broom. They invented a whole mythology – that he is the smartest and the most powerful, and even that he is the best at Dark Arts, even though I have the trophies to prove I beat him.”

Harry winces. “Oh, I bet he hated that.” The attention, that is. Krum is actually a gracious loser.

Ganz rolls her eyes. “They also say he is also the most modest. Tch. You saw the crowd at the train station and the Yule ball. *That* is the advantage he gets without encouraging them. It will only get worse.”

“Halfblood prejudice might not be as bad as you think. It might be worse in Bulgaria than other parts of Europe.”

“Because it was not a problem in this school, da?” Ganz raises an eyebrow. “It is certainly in your Ministry. Who does Umbridge hate the most? Görder, Delacour, and you. She also gives both of us more stupid punishments than most others. All halfbloods”

Harry frowns. It’s a damning pattern, but again seems like cherry

picking the worst of the worst. “We’ve looked into the statistics – there’s a clear bias against muggleborns, but halfbloods weren’t too badly off. It could just be Umbridge. She is known for a vendetta against what she calls half-breeds.” Sirius says she’s a pain in the arse about anti-werewolf legislation.

“She is a mouthpiece for the Minister. Whatever she believes, other people will start believing it too. Her views are broadcast over the world, which means it is more important now than ever to show halfbloods are strong.”

“By fitting pureblood ideals of strength and victory?” Harry says with a challenging tilt of his head.

Ganz doesn’t pick up on it. She nods. “Precisely.”

“And you’re alright with this?” Harry turns to Penchev, curious. “Say you’re the last two. Ganz would beat you.”

“She would. It would be an epic duel. I would be immortalised in memory.”

But you would be dead, Harry does not say. It is clear this is not an idea, to Penchev, it is an ideology. He is not going to change his mind on a dime.

“Why should we set ourselves to their standards?” Harry tries instead. “We can be better. We don’t have to kill each other for their entertainment.”

“They will never respect that. No, we must beat them at their own game,” Ganz insists.

Harry feels a spike of frustration. Negotiating with these two is not like debating Riddle. Riddle is always willing to find common ground, if only to have a figurative perch to shove Harry off of.

They are at clear cross purposes: Harry wants to survive with as many people as possible while Ganz and Penchev want to stand out. If Harry didn’t need Ganz’s skill to counter Riddle, Harry would be leery of letting them close for that alone. As it is, Harry doesn’t intend to toss out any friends for marginal strategic value. Harry might not be cut out for making alliances.

“I thought we had more in common,” Ganz says. “You hate the pureblood Supremacists.”

“I hate specific people who happen to be Supremacists. Hating groups is too much effort.” Gauthier, for instance – Mazet’s young, relatively harmless housemate, and a Supremacist.

“So you will not kick out your purebloods?”

“No.”

“Then there will be no alliance,” Ganz says. She narrows her eyes, calculating, thinking several moves ahead like she does in duels. “How about a non-aggression pact, instead? We won’t stick together, but we won’t kill each other at the start. We will take out the Supremacists first.”

Ganz holds out her hand. Bellatrix, Stoeva, Mazet, Romanov, Bronner. Riddle. Harry’s heart twinges as he reaches out to shake on the deal which could seal Riddle’s fate. “I’ll tell my alliance. I can’t see anyone objecting.”

They don’t. Cedric and Hermione level Harry with weighty stares, as if expecting Harry might prevaricate or add a few conditions, but he doesn't and after a moment their voices join the others in acceptance.

Chapter End Notes

> Next chapter is going to be another long one to round out week 4. Weeks 5, 6, 7 and 8 are currently one chapter each but then again so was week 3 and 4 before I started editing them. Sue me, I have terrible self control and I'm enjoying this Tom/Harry dynamic too much. Incidentally, I've finally updated the chapter count.

Week 4 day three through seven

Chapter Summary

> Harry's avoidance of Riddle is not permanent, to the great consternation of a few people.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The disillusionment charm will be essential in the arena,” Moody says. His wooden leg thunks with every other step. “By the end of this lesson you’d better learn two things. First, how to cast the spell, and second, how to detect disillusioned people and objects.”

Riddle leans over and murmurs, “I am fairly sure you do not need this lesson.” He isn’t wrong. Harry taught disillusionment in the DA.

Harry tilts his head to show he is listening but keeps his attention ostensibly on Moody to avoid drawing his ire and spell-fire. “You’re one to talk.”

He has seen what Riddle can do with disillusionment wandlessly. That’s why they’re perched on a desk at the back of the classroom, watching everyone else. Harry should’ve walked away when Riddle joined him. He doesn’t want to.

“The charm adapts the appearance of your target to match its surroundings, effectively rendering it transparent,” Moody says. “Disillusionment will be used to set up ambushes, hide yourself from predators or enemies, and hide your vital supplies.”

Harry is vaguely paying attention to the lecture, but he is more interested in the boy next to him. Specifically, in finding out which secrets Riddle plucked out of his mind. He has questions. But there’s a chance Riddle doesn’t know some secrets and Harry’s queries could hand him the answers on a silver platter, either in the questions themselves or by bringing the answers to the forefront of his mind, where they are most exposed. Harry’s occlumency is getting better. Still – no need to risk it right off the bat. Although, there’s no reason he can’t ask broad questions. Riddle likes to brag about his plans.

The quirk of lips Harry can see out of the corner of his eye suggests Riddle is currently following his train of thought with amusement, so

Harry doesn't really need to ask, but he does anyway, "Do I have any secrets left from you?"

"Perhaps. Shall I do a full index of your mind so I can give you an accurate answer?"

Implying Riddle doesn't know as much as he'd like. Or "You could be lying. Tricking me into asking more specific questions."

Riddle's lips quirk. "Could be."

Harry considers his options, checking his occlumency while he's at it. It's still fairly solid. He is getting better at obscuring his surface thoughts, though redistributing his efforts in such a way still leaves his mid-tier memories a bit thinly defended. Those memories are private but if Riddle gets a glimpse, it's not the end of the world. Harry will know if Riddle goes after the deep ones, and have time to marshal his defences. No, the surface thoughts are the dangerous ones – they hold the answers to questions you are asked but choose not to voice. He shores his shields up further.

Moody is still rattling on. "Now, it is not a long-lasting spell. The more precisely you cast it, the better it'll look and the longer you've got to work with. Disillusionment degrades faster when applied to something big, moving, or magical. You can stretch the timeframe with a bit of practice. You will need to reapply it daily to a non-magical object and about every six hours to yourselves."

Riddle's mood has soured. You could fit a small dragon in the creases on his brow.

"Do not let disillusionment get to your heads. It does not make you invisible. *Constant vigilance!* Too slow, Trelawny, you've been volunteered. Look there. Where the light hits her just right, her outline shimmers like a soap bubble."

Harry needs to pay attention to this part of the lecture. He watches Moody demonstrate how Trelawny disappears in the shadows, how a disillusioned desk catches the light in the corners, how looking through two disillusioned things makes them both cloudy and more visible. All the while, Riddle is uncharacteristically restless, shifting like he can't get comfortable, glancing at Harry periodically as if checking he is still there.

"You alright, Riddle?"

“Fine.”

“If you say so.”

“Disillusionment is also vulnerable to finite incantatem. It does not make you immune to detection spells. It won’t stop a beast smelling or hearing you. Nor will it stop the omnioculars recording every sound you make – keep that in mind if you decide to go out with a bang. Everyone and your mother will know what and who you’re doing.” If Harry isn’t mistaken, Moody’s whizzing blue eye settles on him and Riddle for a moment. Which is mortifying. Riddle doesn’t laugh at him, as he usually does. Maybe Harry’s occlumency has patched that opening to his surface thoughts.

“It is cast in one of two ways. First! When you are casting on something or someone else, tap your wand on the highest point. If you are casting on yourself, it’s easier to do a lasso around your centre of mass. We’ll start with the first method.”

Harry tunes out again. He watches Riddle twitch with morbid fascination. “Something’s up.”

“I’m fine,” Riddle insists.

“You’ve been kind of grouchy for days.” Since Harry started making progress with Snape. Perhaps because it is actually hindering Riddle, or does he just wants Harry to think that, to lull him into a false sense of security?

Experimentally, Harry lets his stream of consciousness slip out of his shields. There is a slight loosening of Riddle’s posture. But he must know Harry is testing him – Riddle has got eyes and he’s damn observant. Hermione would say it is not a rigorous test.

Except, this isn’t the first time Riddle has seemed unsettled by Harry’s occlumency. It might’ve started as early as the first week, when Harry started using it to focus, but only momentarily, and Riddle’s frowns were similarly short-lived. A long pattern of behaviour is somewhat more convincing. “You don’t like occlumency.”

Riddle huffs. “You’d feel off balance too if someone blocked one of your senses.”

“A sense you shouldn’t be using.”

“I haven’t heard you advocating for everyone to wear blindfolds,

although some people stare rudely, or it is unfair because other people cannot see at all." Riddle cocks an eyebrow, then turns forward again. "I was born with it."

"That doesn't give you the right to use it however you please. It's invasive. You shouldn't be poking about in private thoughts."

"Perhaps not. But by the time I realised I could turn it off, I was quite used to it."

Harry takes a minute to process. "You didn't know what it was?"

"From an orphanage's picture books? Legilimency is barely mentioned in the greatest library in Britain."

"Point." Harry is familiar with the struggle. What he hasn't learnt from Snape, he has figured out with trial and error. Books give a definition and shallow description at most.

"I had no reason to believe I sensed the world any differently. We all talk about what we can see and hear and smell. We all knew when the matron was angry or other kids were jealous, and we avoided the knight warden because we knew he was rotten to the core. I just knew it before they started shouting."

"When did you figure it out?"

"It wasn't all at once." A trainer is heading their way. Riddle demonstrates the disillusionment charm on a chair without even touching it, while Harry performs the spell on one of the objects set out for the task. They wave off the trainer and she goes to help Roger instead. "Hogwarts exposed me to a lot of new ideas and different people. It expands your world."

Harry hums agreement.

"The first clue was Dumbledore and Snape. Both are incredible occlumenses, though I didn't know it. I just sensed something alarmingly different, almost unreal."

"I suppose, when you are accustomed to something being normal, it is the lack that makes it stand out."

"Oh, they stood out. Imagine you can see and hear a person, you know they're there, but you can't touch them. They are like a ghost, but hidden among us, and no one else seems to realise something is wrong

with them."

"Is that why you don't like Dumbledore?"

Riddle snorts. "I get along with Snape as well as anyone can, and he is even cagier than the headmaster."

Harry takes the hint and stops prying. "And the second clue?"

"Stumbled on the right book – after several dead-end searches into brain diseases, near-humans and undead, with a lengthy tangent on vampires."

"We've all thought that about Snape at least once," Harry grins. It turns sly when it occurs to him exactly where the useful books are. "How long did you hold out before sneaking into the restricted section?"

"Hold out?" Riddle echoes with exaggerated puzzlement. "Whatever do you mean?"

Harry bites his lip to avoid bringing the wrath of Moody down upon them. Moody still eyes them suspiciously. Riddle reclines on his hands, indolent, almost daring the old trainer to try a spell. Moody's self-preservation instincts are far too developed to allow him to be baited into a trap. Moody gives them one last glare and continues, "Your standard suite of detection spells will work on disillusionment. I'd cast homenum revelio compulsively if I were you. It's only paranoia until it saves your life. There are several varieties that work better in low light. I'll demonstrate."

Riddle spreads his arms further, leans over, and with only that slight movement, the bulk of his body is abruptly behind and encircling Harry. He is as close as they can get without also getting detention. Harry's hair stands on end at the rustle of movement he can't see, but can sense – Riddle leaning over Harry's shoulder, into his ear. Harry tries to focus on the lesson but his traitorous heart stutters into a faster rhythm.

The heat is rising and Riddle dumps ice cold water down his spine. "I know you're an animagus."

Harry freezes. He does not panic, as Riddle surely intended – aiming to make Harry's shields falter in shock? Harry surveys his shields and realises the small window he opened has started leaking his surface thoughts all over the place. He shores up the cracks, but carefully,

meticulously, because Riddle could also be trying to scare him into making hasty changes, as rushing often comes with flaws. Only after the hole is patched does he guess at Riddle's motivation. Riddle is fishing for information. He tried to make the answer pop into Harry's mind as soon as he saw the opportunity, which means, "You don't know what I am."

"Hmm." Riddle does not sound as if he anticipates this will be a problem for long. "Something small and fast. A sparrow?"

Word associations are a dangerous game. Yes or no answers will be trivial to sort out if Harry's shields make the slightest slip. It sends adrenaline coursing through his veins. He can't help baring his teeth, part threat part grin, but he tilts his face away so Riddle can only glimpse his profile. An expression could still give him away if his mind does not.

"A bee? It fits. You are hard working. Very protective. Surprisingly venomous."

Harry doesn't react. His heartrate kicks up, and he can't control the reflex, but he can pretend it is due to Riddle's proximity.

"Perhaps a hummingbird? Their heart is proportionally the largest on the planet," Riddle suggests with a sly smile.

More silence. Harry is less a bird in this moment than a rabbit watching a cat stalk unnervingly close and hoping it will pass by. He doesn't flinch. He holds his nerve.

"Or a dragonfly?" Riddle ducks closer. "Did you know they are one of the most voracious predators?"

Harry does not relax. He dares not even think of Riddle getting closer or further from the answer. He keeps his breathing even and his heartrate remains high. Riddle continues to throw guesses at him, but Harry pretends Riddle is describing a visit to an eclectic zoo and manages to dissociate the concept of animagi entirely. By the end of the lesson, Harry has learnt more about disillusionment charms, and he is calm. Assured. He can do it – he can keep Riddle out.

…

Harry doesn't have to avoid Riddle any longer. He still should, of course. Legilimency aside, there remains a myriad of other reasons it is a bad idea to hang out. But then, if Harry did everything he *ought*

to, he would only have allies instead of friends. He'd praise the Ministry and kiss Grindelwald's old saggy arse. He'd rather not. Some things are worth, perhaps not death, but an increased risk of it. Integrity. Honesty. Quidditch.

Life is a balance of risk and reward, really, and Riddle is a mightily temping reward. So Harry stops avoiding Riddle's eyes, and he stops fleeing the common room for his lonely dorm. He returns to his armchair by the fire with his books and notes, usually beside Cedric and Roger, and Hermione if she isn't stuck in the library, and Amelia if she's still awake.

If Riddle turns up, he will read over Harry's shoulder, inevitably comment on his studies, and Harry will be drawn into a discussion which could go any imaginable direction until it is just the two of them left.

People notice. The champions first, but news trickles back to the mentors, and then to Madam Pomfrey because Snape is *pissed*.

Harry's scalp is still itchy where the donkey ears sprouted when Dumbledore appears out of the blue. "Ah, so good to see you, my boy. Would you care to walk with me?"

"Sir?" Harry asks, surprised. They haven't exchanged more than passing greetings since their first walk. Dumbledore seems to make a point not to single out any champions except Trelawny, as is expected for his own champion, and just as well – the Ministry would certainly take note and Harry doesn't need Umbridge breathing down his neck for yet another reason.

Dumbledore would not seek Harry out unless it was important. But Harry and Riddle agreed to meet on the third floor in a few minutes. Harry will certainly be late, or miss it entirely, if he goes with Dumbledore. Standing Riddle up without warning seems rude in the extreme. It's not like Harry is blowing him off for no reason, though. Harry will explain and apologise to Riddle later.

Harry follows Dumbledore in silence for a few minutes. He assumed they'd stick to the castle because the rain is coming down sideways, rendering the grounds most unappealing, but Dumbledore heads out gamely anyway. Each step is further from his meeting point with Riddle. The omnioculars struggle to keep up but the weather gives Dumbledore no trouble. It seems to vanish into a bubble of calm about six feet from the old wizard, so Harry sticks close.

“I know the secrets of this castle better than the Ministry. They miss much in their hubris,” Dumbledore says. “I notice you’ve been sneaking around with Mr Riddle.”

Harry’s blood spikes with adrenaline at being caught breaking the rules. But then he remembers they’re not Dumbledore’s rules, and the headmaster is unlikely to turn him in to Umbridge.

Harry can brazen it out. He straightens his spine. “You needn’t make it sound so sordid. We just chat between classes. Makes the walk more interesting.”

Dumbledore doesn’t scold him. He looks concerned. “Mr Riddle’s interest in you has been plain to see. I have to ask, Harry – does he pressure you to do anything you are uncomfortable with?”

“No, sir,” Harry says, because it’s true. Riddle has never made him feel uncomfortable – not in the way Dumbledore means. At his worst, Riddle is annoying or intimidating. He’s not creepy. Which itself is annoying, because Harry might not be so attracted to creepy.

Dumbledore relaxes slightly. “If that ever changes, my boy, you can talk to me. And if you do not wish to talk to me, then, please, confide in Miss Granger, Sirius or Madam Pomfrey.”

“Um. Yeah. I’ll do that.” Harry can hear the lack of concern in his voice. Dumbledore looks at him and Harry shrugs. “I’m worried about him killing me, not assaulting me.”

“Mr Potter, I do not make these warnings lightly.”

Wind hisses through wooden slats of the rickety bridge over the valley. Harry locks his knees as the whole structure shakes with a particularly strong gust. He rests his elbows on the drenched railing and stares out as far as he can see – about ten feet, which is reduced to three as the omnioculars catch up. Harry glares at them.

“If it puts your mind at ease, Professor, neither of us are serious about the flirting. It’s not going anywhere.” Riddle is not coy, and what he wants from Harry is obvious – he wants to fight. Words or wands, he’ll take what he can get. If Harry looks at it from the outside, perhaps he can see where Dumbledore’s concerns come from. Riddle likes a struggle, and if you throw flirting into the picture, that picture could get ugly real fast. Not many people would realise the flirting is a game, or that Riddle isn’t interested in what traditionally comes after. It only comes up when Riddle is leveraging *Harry’s* desires. “I don’t

want to get involved with an enemy and I'm not sure Riddle is even into that sort of thing."

Harry wracks his brains over their past interactions, now, because he doesn't have the best track record of identifying carnal attraction (Ron is going to mock him mercilessly once Fred is openly dating Hermione, Harry knows it) and then checks again for any self-denial. He stands by his assessment that the fake flirting was definitely fake. Harry has caught Riddle staring at his lips, but he seems most invested in arguing with the words coming out of them. Riddle is interested, certainly, but in Harry's ideas, his mind, not the body attached to it. At least, not the way Harry is attracted to Riddle.

"Ah, so you already know Mr Riddle lies about his feelings," Dumbledore says. "He pretends to care about people."

"Right," Harry shuffles. He is itching to change the subject, but he is indignant on Riddle's behalf. Some of Dumbledore's suspicions are unwarranted and Harry can't let it go. "Sir, even if Riddle was interested in someone, I don't think he'd assault them."

"Harry, I know he is charming, but look beyond the veneer." Dumbledore's brows crinkle in concern.

"No, think about it. The kind of bloke who'd do such a thing – he prioritises what he wants and dismisses what his partner wants. Would he limit the behaviour only to his sexual wants? Of course not. It shows itself, say, if he wants his partner to hang out with him instead of their friends, he'll whine and cajole and threaten to get his way because only what *he* wants matters," Harry scowls. He is reminded of one of Ginny's first boyfriends, the one the twins had a little *chat* with after Ginny hexed bat boogeys onto his face.

Harry glances over. Dumbledore is listening intently. "You make an interesting point, Harry."

Buoyed by the belief, Harry stands tall. "Riddle wants to duel me. He wants it a *lot*. He's tried to persuade me a dozen different ways and not once made me feel uncomfortable."

Riddle challenges Harry, certainly, the way a good spar challenges him. He doesn't pressure him. It's rather eery, actually. Even with the occlumency as an obstacle, Riddle is so good at reading people, he backs off before Harry even realises he is starting to feel uncomfortable. Harry has no doubt Riddle could be the carrot or the stick as necessary, but he clearly prefers to be the carrot. He figures

out what people want and lures them in. He wouldn't be so bloody hard to resist otherwise.

"I hope you are right, but it pays to be cautious," Dumbledore says. "Obsession can be very dangerous."

"More dangerous than a teenage murder tournament?"

Dumbledore does not appreciate the flippancy. "I think those threats compound, don't you, given how often people weaponize feelings?"

"Yeah," Harry sighs and curses the Games for the umpteenth time.

"Passion is not the same as love," Dumbledore gazes out into the grey gloom. For a moment, he looks his age. "To some people, love is about possession, entitlement or control. Or if they are capable of truer love, it comes second to power or money or fame."

Harry is not sure they're just talking about Riddle now. "He wants to win the Games. I know." It doesn't take a genius of Dumbledore's calibre to note the bleeding obvious. Riddle has outright stated he's after the status granted to a victor, and his actions don't contradict it. And Riddle is manipulative, of course, maybe that would stretch to controlling behaviour, but possessive?

Dumbledore seems to sense his doubt. He frowns at the castle for a long minute, wrestling with something, but he makes up his mind. He gestures down the bridge, and they continue walking until the omnioculars fall behind. "I should not tell you this. I should maintain student confidentiality, but I believe there is a serious risk to your safety you need to be aware of."

Harry's interest is piqued, and he feels far less conflicted than the headmaster about getting critical information, ethically sourced or not. It's the Games, after all.

"There were disciplinary incidents in Mr Riddle's first year," Dumbledore explains. "A series of thefts in the Slytherin dorm which escalated until Mr Riddle had accumulated a treasure trove of precious heirlooms. Not to sell, you understand; they were leveraged to control the rightful owner's behaviour or kept as trophies proving his victory. Word got to the Board of Governors before my professors were even aware of the problem. The Slytherins and their parents insisted on expulsion, and the Board concurred. But a mere day later, when it came time to record the testimonies, Slytherin House assumed the blame and every last one of them insisted on leniency for Mr Riddle.

They never said what he did to persuade them – they were sworn to silence. But Harry, Mr Riddle did not start learning dark magic after his name came out of the Goblet," Dumbledore finishes grimly.

Harry's eyebrows shoot up. "You think he confounded them or something? At eleven years old. The whole House." Surely no one is that powerful.

"No. He scared them. Every Slytherin walked on eggshells around him for months. And he would not have had to curse all of them, only one person badly enough to terrify the rest."

"Did Madam Pomfrey report anything?"

"Madam Pomfrey?"

"I'd expect someone to notice that kind of damage. Injuries or dreamless sleep potions, at the very least."

Dumbledore frowns. "You may wish to see him in the best light, but he does not balk at harming others."

That's a no to the hospitalisation. Harry wonders if Dumbledore knows Riddle is a legilimens. It could certainly explain their silence if Riddle gathered enough blackmail on all of them.

"It's not faith in Riddle's moral fibre," Harry says. He has none. "I'm just trying to make sense of it. Something doesn't add up." He knows what it's like to be the target of a gang of Slytherins. Mobs are an amplifier – the more violence you put in, the more you get out. Harry thinks, if fear could've tamed them, then no Slytherins would've snitched to Dear Mother and Father about the thievery in the first place.

"Regardless, you see Harry, when Tom Riddle claims ownership over something, he will cling to it no matter the cost."

"Did they let him keep the stuff he stole?" Harry jolts abruptly because that does not fit in with the picture he is tentatively putting together.

"No, Mr Riddle returned all the items. There would have been criminal charges, otherwise," Dumbledore says.

Harry does not point out a criminal record is at least one cost Riddle was not prepared to bare for his trophies. He thinks it is more likely

that Riddle was not cowed into anything, and instead he gave them up as part of a deal he cut with his House. Harry can guess what happened next, then. “So Riddle returned the heirlooms and there were no further incidents.”

“That we heard of.”

“That you heard of,” Harry concedes. Riddle may have continued. Whatever he is holding over his House sounds powerful enough to keep their mouths shut. Harry is not quite putting two and two together and getting possessive hoarder, nor does he feel like a trophy as Dumbledore clearly thinks he should, but he is aware he could be too partial towards Riddle and biased against the rest of the house. “The Slytherins said they started it – I believe that part. Riddle retaliated and escalated – sounds like him.” *Sounds reasonable,* Harry doesn’t say.

“Hmm, were it just a magpie tendency, I would be less concerned. But his thievery was actively malicious. He chose to pursue revenge instead of reaching out to a teacher.”

“Ah, the fastest way to get what he wants. Makes sense,” Harry realises. At Dumbledore’s aghast look, he hastily adds, “for how Riddle operates, I mean.”

Dumbledore does not appear to be reassured.

“Professor, how long did it take you and Professor Flitwick to stop those girls stealing Luna’s belongings? And before that, how many points did she lose for attending class barefoot before anyone even acknowledged there was a problem?” Harry asks. He knows the answers. He knows the well-intentioned interventions from Harry and his friends, and later the professors, only emboldened the bullies for a time because it cemented the idea that Luna would not retaliate herself, and they blamed her for their punishment.

Riddle proved he could bully back, and furthermore, do it *better*.

“I hope you are not suggesting his methods are superior.”

“Not at all.” Harry couldn’t condense something so complicated into better or worse. There are too many metrics for success: speed, permanence, if it reforms the bullies or merely supresses them, and that’s *before* debating whether the ends justify the means. Harry shrugs. “I’m just saying, Riddle knows how people think, he knows what he wants, and he knows the most direct path to get there.”

“With no thought to the people he tramples on his way,” Dumbledore says. “Mr Riddle treats people like objects. You and I love easily. Friends, family, partners. In all the years I’ve known him, Mr Riddle has never loved another. He does not have the unconditional love of family, and he discards his friends, like your Miss Granger, all too easily. I fear he is not capable of love.”

Harry doesn’t know what to say to that, except something Dumbledore wants to hear. “I don’t trust Riddle. I won’t forget we’re in the Games.” Then, valiantly holding back a blush, he adds, “No matter what happens.”

Dumbledore regards him seriously before relaxing. “He is a charming boy, uncommonly gifted with hiding his true face. I am glad you see it.”

…

“Where were you earlier – did the aurors chase you off? Don’t tell me you forgot about me?” Riddle asks lightly, but there is a tense note underneath, like he is trying to figure out how annoyed he should be.

Harry gestures for him to lower his voice. “Something came up.”

Riddle decides to start conservatively at moderately annoyed. “Well, while you apparently found better things to do, I was waiting around for you to show up as we’d planned. I don’t appreciate you wasting my time.”

“It happened at the last minute,” Harry explains. “It was important, and not something I could just put off.”

Riddle glares. “Still, a little curtesy wouldn’t go astray.”

“I couldn’t exactly send a note.” His ire starts to rise to match. Harry didn’t leave him hanging on purpose. He shouldn’t have to report his every movement. Dumbledore’s warnings echo through his head: possessive, controlling.

“You could’ve sent Dobby.”

Harry’s indignation pulls up short. He could’ve sent Dobby to cancel their plans.

“I should’ve thought of that. I’m sorry for not warning you. I’ll let you know, next time.”

Harry is braced for another snide comment about him making plans to ditch Riddle again already, but Riddle nods, mollified. “See that you do. So, what was more interesting than me?”

Harry tilts his head. It sounds like Riddle means it. Even the tense undertone is gone. He sounds curious, like he expects something Harry found interesting to interest him as well. “Dumbledore wanted a chat.”

Riddle wrinkles his nose in distaste, but the curiosity doesn’t waver or darken. “What did he want this time?”

Harry considers. He wants to know what Riddle did to scare the Slytherins, if it really was legilimency, and why he hasn’t done the same to the Blood Supremacists. But he’s not supposed to know the incident even happened, and there’s fuck all chance of Riddle admitting it in any case. So he won’t talk about that, but they can still have a laugh. Harry bat his eyelashes. “All this flirting might amount to nothing, you won’t make an honest man out of me, you’re just after my virtue.”

Riddle doesn’t sweep his hand up for a chaste kiss. He doesn’t assure Harry that he loves him truly and deeply. He doesn’t carry on their joke at all. Harry straightens abruptly, dropping the levity as he realises he has stumbled into something which is no laughing matter.

“Did he, now,” Riddle says with tightly controlled anger. “I suppose he told you all his theories. Did he mince it with euphemisms, like stunted emotional development, or did he outright claim I am incapable of love?”

Harry winces, which is answer enough.

“As if it is any of his damn business,” Riddle hisses. “Did he tell you he tried to force me into counselling? And he didn’t listen when I told him I wasn’t interested in being fixed, and in fact don’t think there is anything wrong in the first place – different does not mean broken. But, no, I wouldn’t know what’s good for me, as if I am some insensible *infant*.”

“Hey, shh,” Harry nervously looks around. They’re not in a good spot for a spiel at this volume – these corridors echo. “Come on,” he grabs Riddle’s hand and pulls him into a nook between a window and the curtains which should hide them from sight, and plasters a muffling spell on top. Harry sits on the windowsill and pulls Riddle down next to him. “Will this do? If you really need to vent, we should go to the

Room."

"I am not *that* angry," Riddle says, sounding *just about* that angry.

Harry squeezes his hand. He is less careful with his strength than his words, "I think I get it. Are you asexual?"

That gives Riddle pause. "You've heard of it. Many people haven't."

"I know someone. You remind me of him sometimes."

"What kind is he?"

"What?" Harry says blankly.

A low huff of amusement. "Maybe we are not quite on the same page. Asexuality is a spectrum. There is variety. Some are not sexually or romantically attracted to people, some are also sex repulsed, some aren't."

"Yeah, I didn't know that," Harry says. In hindsight, "Charlie isn't much more interested in being asexual than he is in sex. He doesn't talk about it much." Just whenever Mrs Weasley laments the lack of grandchildren, really. She is adamant it's the haircut, for him and Bill both.

"Sounds like he's right at one end of the spectrum. I'm at the other end, near demisexuals, who only develop sexual attraction after forming a deep bond."

Harry shouldn't assume too much based on Charlie, then. "You'd best explain it."

Riddle hums thoughtfully. "What are you?"

"What am I what? Oh, into? Both. Men and women."

"Then consider the great menu of what humanity has to offer. There are several large categories, and you wouldn't dismiss any of them out of hand. You still have preferences of course. Perhaps for spicey food?" Riddle suggests with a sly look.

Harry bats his eyes again, reassured to be back on familiar ground.

"To extend the metaphor, Dumbledore is gay. He'd peruse the menu and only see things he likes on one half, say, pizzas. He may like Bratwurst more than pepperoni, but he's certainly not interested in

pasta," Riddle says a little viciously and Harry chokes.

Riddle slaps him on the back in much brighter spirits given the chance to be utterly *wicked*. "Breathe, Harry."

"Fuck you," Harry chokes. He does *not* want to think about Dumbledore's preference for German sausage.

"I'm getting there," Riddle replies, and Harry almost chokes again. "Now, an asexual like Charlie, we could say he is a picky eater and doesn't fancy much of anything. Whereas I am not picky, necessarily, but I look at the menu, and I'm not hungry yet. I might develop a craving for a specific dish after enough exposure. If it had sufficient spice to make it interesting."

Harry realises Riddle's hand is still on his back when his thumb strokes his neck. Gooseflesh chases a wave of hot shivers down Harry's spine. He crosses his legs in self-defence. Harry thinks, not for the first time, that their running joke is not strictly *nice*. It is a playful game of footsie most of the time – all the better to disguise the random kicks they throw in to see if they can make the other squeal.

Riddle squeezes his neck once more and then mercifully releases him. The shivers run back up, all the way until Harry's fingers tingle. Riddle slouches back against the windowsill and glares out at the rain. "It isn't hormone imbalance or depression or trauma or autism or psychopathy or narcissism – and I know because they *checked*. All smiling and well-meaning, as if they weren't insisting I must be broken in some fundamental way – that I couldn't possibly have a fulfilling life the way I am."

"That's stupid. Of course you can," Harry says. He leans on the opposite side of the window and tries to meet Riddle's eyes, but his gaze is unfocused or locked on a bitter memory. Harry doesn't want him lost in there. He draws his feet up onto the ledge and dumps them across Riddle's lap. Riddle blinks and reflexively grabs Harry's knee. "Fulfillment isn't something you can get from other people. It is internal. It comes from yourself. Whether you are confident and happy with your actions, and the direction you are actively taking with your life."

Riddle is entirely present and fixated on Harry again. Hanging on his words, as always, only peripherally aware of the body attached. He is absently tracing the contours of Harry's knee through the fabric. Unlike Riddle, Harry can barely concentrate past the touch.

“I can walk that direction alone. I do not need someone to *complete* me. I am not half a person,” Riddle says, steel and danger in his voice. “I know my worth and I do not need a partner to achieve some overly-romanticised ideal of fulfilment.”

“We do elevate romance, don’t we?” Harry says. He hasn’t thought about it one way or the other before now. “Over other sources of fulfilment, I mean. Professional or personal.”

“Value your career over a relationship? How cold of you to even suggest such a thing.”

Harry huffs a laugh. “You know, I can’t count the number of times people said my parents were lucky. They had the kind of fairytale romance people aspire to. It wasn’t a front – they really were happily in love. But they didn’t spend every spare minute wrapped around each other. They could’ve put the relationship over their jobs, could’ve lived off dad’s inheritance, but they didn’t.” He leans on the glass. It is freezing cold where his forehead touches the pane, and a bracing contrast to his knee. “Dad did work he loved – making joke products, making mischief with his friends. He spent his free time organising regular Quidditch games for their cohort and coaching the little league so they kids could enjoy it too. Mum – hah, she was worse – she brought her work home and had to be dragged away from it every night. She loved the charity.”

“Hermione and I grew up in a much better place than she did. I’d thank her for that, if I could,” Riddle says.

“She’d appreciate it,” Harry smiles sadly. “She always said nothing was better than doing something that really matters. Nothing. People said dad was her whole world, and vice versa – but it isn’t true, is it? People envied how happy they were together, but they weren’t happy *only* because they were together.”

“And perhaps they wouldn’t have been happy if they only had each other,” Riddle says.

“Maybe not. Maybe happiness is about balance. Or maybe it’s about stuffing as much variety into your days as you can.”

“Happiness defined as the exclusion of boredom and apathy. It makes more sense to me than the trite Dumbledore spouts off.”

“Maybe it only needs to make sense to you. Could be that there’s no universal formula that works for everyone, and if you find the one for

you, that's enough. Different happiness for different people." Harry gives a careless shrug.

"You have an interesting way of looking at the world," Riddle tilts his head. "What are your opinions on conflicting desires – either when two people want conflicting things, or one person wants two things with are mutually exclusive."

Harry gives him a side eye. "For instance, if one person wanted everyone to survive a murder tournament and if another person wanted to kill them all for power and profit?"

Riddle grins. "Hypothetically."

"Well, hypothetically, if we weren't speaking hypothetically," Harry says, not in the mood to beat around this particular bush. Riddle snickers at the manner he has chosen to barrel through it. "I wouldn't hate you for wanting power more than you want me." Though it does make them thoroughly incompatible, what with Harry being dead to him, and all. "You know what you want, and you have the balls to go for it. You didn't pick the easy road, volunteering to be here. I respect that."

"Really?" Riddle asks curiously. "You have a strong moral code, and seeking personal power at the expense of other people is objectively selfish. Where do you draw the line, where do you think morality should curb the pursuit of what people want? Do you think the selfish should back down for the greater good – put the wants of many above the few?"

Harry raises an eyebrow. If Riddle thinks throwing in Grindelwald's utilitarian rhetoric is enough to make Harry recoil from his own opinion, he's got another think coming.

"I believe it is natural for humans to pursue what they want, and that a person does not get to choose what they want. Since they cannot choose it, I do not blame them for wanting things which I do not agree with. If the actions they undertake while pursuing what they want hurts people, it will conflict with what other people want, and those people might now want to punish them. So I guess I believe in consequences."

"If people do not choose what they want, as you say, but wants lead to action which leads to consequences, then are the consequences not also an inevitable result of something they did not choose – therefore also no fault of their own? "

“Oh, now you’re getting tricky.” Harry smiles as he tries to think his way out of this one.

…

The next day, Krum is tense, muscles standing out on his beefy arms.

“Did you see the new decree?” he asks.

“Not yet,” Harry says. He usually checks the noticeboard after breakfast. It tends to put him off his food.

“The grounds are out of bounds.”

Harry straightens. “What? All of it? All the time?”

“Yes,” Krum scowls. He shifts restlessly, glancing once more at the windows. The Great Hall is the brightest room in the castle, and it still feels as it the weak late-November sunlight doesn’t reach the tables sometimes.

Scotland is dark and dank enough in late November – Harry does not need to spend all day indoors on top of it.

They’ve been overheard. Umbridge pauses on her way to the head table. “Now, don’t pout,” she chides with a bright smile “There is no need for you to be outside. All the training takes place indoors. You should be busy if you are taking this tournament seriously. And it’s for your own good – it is ghastly out there, and we wouldn’t want you to catch a chill are die before even making it to the arena.” She giggles. *Giggles*.

Harry and Krum glare at her retreating back.

“I would like to face her in the arena,” Krum mutters darkly.

…

Krum gets worse over the weekend. Harry can see it in his shoulders, his terse movements. Harry still has the gym as an outlet, but it doesn’t seem sufficient for Krum. Krum used to go down to the Quidditch pitch most days, rain or shine. Even without his broom, he seemed to find it relaxing to be out under the sky on the grass. Stuck indoors, his form on the obstacle course is getting sloppy.

Harry is next to him at the drink station when the idea strikes. “I find flying always makes me feel better. It doesn’t matter what the problem

is. It just clears my head. Is it the same for you?"

Krum blinks at the non-sequitur. "Yes."

Harry nods. "Well, we have to make our own entertainment these days," he says. He flicks his eyes to the omnioculars. Krum catches the gesture, and his attention sharpens. "See you at lunch in a bit."

It's been weeks since Harry got on a broom. He tried to organise something with Cedric and Roger a fortnight ago, but they got too caught up in training. It is Sunday, though. Their mentors want them to take it easy.

Krum doesn't look any happier a few hours later when Harry sees him heading into the Great Hall. Harry jogs to catch up, flashing a smile when Krum nods hello. They continue to their spot.

"Morning, Potter, Krum," Roger says.

Harry flashes a two fingered salute and then stretches his hand out before sticking it in his pocket. Seven fingers for the seventh floor.

Roger grins and flips him off in return. Cedric, ever the polite one, just nods slightly.

"Got anything interesting planned for the rest of the day?" Roger asks, but he means *What time?*

"Nothing," Harry says, and answers *Now.* "The trainers haven't schedule anything I'm particularly interested in. Might have a nap or something, I'm buggered."

"Hmm. Sundays. Professor Flitwick doesn't want me exhausting myself either," Cedric says.

And if the powers that be can't spot them with the omnioculars for the next few hours, no one should be overly concerned.

They chat while they eat. Roger and Cedric finish first and head off in separate directions.

"Have you explored the castle much?" Harry asks Krum.

"Not intentionally. But the first few days, looking for the classrooms…"

Harry laughs. "I know what you mean. I got lost for weeks in first year

and the secret corridors still don't make sense. I swear some of them are portals – there's no way a normal passage can go from the second floor to the sixth without stairs."

"That is weird."

"Yeah. Come on, I'll show you."

Harry takes Krum to the secret entrance and pushes the heavy tapestry aside. The omnioculars can't do the same, though they might still be listening.

Harry leads them on a circuitous route, showing Krum more of the secret corridors for future reference, and they make their way to the seventh floor.

Harry presses his finger to his lips and then quickly paces back and forth in front of the tapestry of the ballet dancing trolls. The handle appears on the opposite wall and Harry ushers Krum inside before anyone can spot them.

Krum gasps.

Harry watches and smiles. "Just walk in front of the wall three times, thinking of this place, and you can come here whenever you want. But keep it secret, yeah? I'm sure Umbridge would love to take it off us."

"Of course," Krum says, faintly. The room is bigger than the castle. It must be, to fit an entire Quidditch pitch. "Thank you, Harry."

"What took you so long! We started without you," Roger calls.

"Took the scenic route," Harry says. As funny as Harry thinks it would be to use his animagus form in front of Krum, specifically, the secret is worth a bit more than a joke, so flying will be with brooms only.

"Up!" Harry's favoured Silver Arrow jumps off the rack into his hand. It's not a racing broom, but they age better than Shooting Stars, and this one has a good attitude. It's always keen for a race and only tries to buck him off occasionally. "Did you start scoring? If you're a few dozen up already, you might win this time."

"Ooh, tough talk. Did you get that line from Malfoy?" Cedric pulls up next to Roger. Mostly. He's a Cleansweep loyalist so he perseveres with the one with half its bristles missing. The unpredictable steering certainly makes these matches more exciting.

Harry slicks his hair back and sticks his nose in the air.

Cedric snorts and pelts the quaffle at him.

Harry catches it, does a barrel roll, and throws it back.

Krum intercepts, shooting up from below on an old Comet. It's a shoddy replacement for his racing spec Firebolt, but with Krum's expert touch it moves like a dream. Krum is beaming, and yeah, Harry is not getting any more training done today.

"Two a side?" Harry offers. They have enough people to play a decent game and not so many that Umbridge will be suspicious. He should've done this ages ago. "I know a house elf who makes a *mean* bludger."

Chapter End Notes

> Everyone should watch Daniel Sloss's show Jigsaw on Netflix. He's got a very interesting philosophy about relationships and happiness.
>
> I didn't have much time to edit in the last few weeks, so I hoped you enjoyed this, warts and all. And I didn't get around to replying to all the comments, but I read and appreciate them all.

Week 5 day one through five

Chapter Summary

Tom Riddle has to change his plans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A red curse skims Harry's head, close enough to trail the scent of burning hair. Somewhere behind him, Hermione yelps as Snape nearly goes two for two. Hermione isn't even supposed to be duelling – she's working on transfiguration and, apparently, situational awareness.

Harry darts in close, firing in a blur. If he can just get near enough to overwhelm Snape's defences, he might get the upper hand. But this close, Harry's metal shield forms too slowly to block curses. He dodges what he can, and summons a desk to intercept, but that's the last of those, and he is forced to retreat. He takes a knockback jinx to the chest, which is not the ideal way to get going.

Harry rolls to his feet and conjures a lion, though it feels like his sternum was punted through his ribs and his lungs will never inflate again. He doesn't need breath for casting silently. He can push through the shock and keep moving. The others might call his training with the quarterstaff primitive, but it taught him how to take a hit and get back up. And all fighting, when it comes down to it, is a messy scramble to be the last one standing.

Snape transfigures the lion into a swarm of rats. Harry retreats further, blasting the little blighters before they can turn him into mincemeat. It is possible that Snape still isn't over the Riddle fraternisation situation, which apparently makes Snape a first-class hypocrite – but, nope, Harry is *not* thinking about that. He ducks a curse, returns a stunning spell, and Snape scoffs. He raises his hand to end the duel.

Harry keeps his wand up, just to be sure Snape isn't playing a nasty trick. But with a disdainful look, the unruffled potions master starts repairing the room. After a moment, Harry helps.

"Did you source your entire repertoire from a book titled one-hundred and one standard duelling spells?"

Harry doesn't bother responding. He doesn't need validation from

Snape. He knows he is, in fact, a rather creative dueller. His repertoire may not be boundless, but he knows a versatile bunch of spells and he can use them well.

“It is unacceptable,” Snape continues. He slashes his wand in a familiar motion and white light flashes Harry’s way. Harry flicks up a metal shield – a strong one. Whatever that spell is, it’s dark. It has shattered his copper shield before. “The incantation is sectumsempra. It is a cutting curse. The lacerations are particularly resistant to healing. Well? Cast it.”

Harry conjures a pillow and aims, “*Sectumsempra.*”

A gash splits the fabric from corner to corner. White feathery innards spill out.

“Sloppy. The movement is a slash, not a wobble.”

“*Sectumsempra.*”

The new pillow rips clean in two.

“Hmph.” Snape vanishes the remains. “The next is a jinx which affixes the target’s tongue to the roof of their mouth. The incantation is langlock.”

Harry’s wand arm drops to his side. “A silencing spell.”

“Not flashy enough for you, Potter?”

“I already know several silencing spells. How’s this one any different?”

“Silencio and quietus, I suppose you mean, for lack of a spell which is even more *obvious*. Can you not comprehend that there is an advantage in surprise; in obscure spells that your enemy cannot counter?”

If Harry filters out the vitriol, he might conclude that, “You mean it can't be cancelled with a finite.” Big deal. But Harry wouldn’t be averse to some quiet, so he aims this one at Snape.

…

“What did he expect me to do – jinx a pillow?” Harry grumbles. “Pillows don’t have tongues.”

“Oh, is that why he started firing off curses again,” Hermione says.

They fall silent as Moody passes by their table, and the black box upon it rattles and hisses.

“Did that sound serpentine to you?” Hermione taps her chin. “Perhaps if it has a stinger…”

Harry isn’t going to stick his hand in to check. The box at the last table turned out to contain a fire crab.

“I’m not guessing the species based on a hiss – not after the sound your geese made.”

Hermione winces. “I didn’t mean for them to swoop you. Sorry.”

“Hey, they went after Snape next. Made my day.”

“Yes, well. Professor McGonagall was not impressed.”

“She set you a challenge to alter a spell. That sort of thing is bound to go wrong the first few times.”

“Hmm, I didn’t anticipate how their natural personality would come through. I assumed they’d be as biddable as my usual canaries.”

The mysterious beast in the box snuffles and scratches at the wood.

“Claws,” they observe simultaneously.

“Could be a very angry kneazle or a very small wampus,” Harry says.

“Bit *too* small for a wampus.”

“That’s what we thought about the fire crab.”

Hermione conjures some garlic, but the creature doesn’t react. “Not a wampus.”

The box is suspiciously silent now, which reminds Harry, “What use is an irreversible silencing spell, anyway? The tongue thing is much slower to cast than silencio.”

“Incredibly useful, I’d say,” comes a deep voice from behind them.

Harry does not jump. He wants that on record. A flinch is not a jump. “Sir?”

Moody’s magic eye is fixed on the box but the regular one bores into

Harry. “Think, Potter. Just like some spells can only be cast silently, some must be spoken aloud. I’ll give you three guesses.”

“You mean the Unforgiveables.”

“Aye.”

“Oh.” It’s a disarming charm. Why didn’t Snape just say that? Maybe because it hasn’t occurred to him that their tutoring sessions could teach Harry something useful. Any benefit Harry gets out of their lessons seems to be incidental. Except Snape’s order is still ringing in Harry’s ears: *You are going to survive.* He was adamant. Snape just might – and Harry is only entertaining the most hesitant of slight possibilities, here – Snape *might* be on his side. Even if only to spite Umbridge.

“Now,” Moody says. “If you two are finished your little natter, care to tell me what’s in the box?”

“Er… um.”

…

Soft footsteps cross the common room. Harry only tilts his head and squints enough to confirm it isn’t Bellatrix come to pounce on his weakness. The fire scalds his brain. It gets him even through his eyelids and the arm he drapes across them, but he can’t muster the will to get up to douse it.

The footsteps stop by his head. Fingers briefly straighten his hair.

“I know you’re wide awake,” Riddle says, “so this dramatic picture is less exhausted student than fainting maiden.”

“Hmm.” Harry has nothing witty to say.

“You’re slow today. What’s wrong?”

Harry grunts. “Headache.”

“Don’t stubborn it out. Just get a potion from Madam Pomfrey.”

“Can’t. Reached my weekly limit.”

“It’s Monday.” Riddle moves in front of the fire. In his shadow, it is dark enough Harry risks opening his eyes.

“She lowered my dose. Something about side effects of prolonged use.”

“Well, the side effects *are* worse than a standard addiction. Not that you’d want to go cold turkey into the arena, either.”

“Yeah, laugh it up. It’s your bloody fault.”

“Ah, Snape is drilling your occlumency up to standard so you can survive me,” Riddle smirks.

“Just the opposite, actually. The git hasn’t stopped grilling me since he figured out I’m hiding something from him.”

“What. You didn’t tell him?”

“Course not. He’d throttle me.”

“Unlikely,” Riddle assures absently. “But he didn’t find out digging around your head?”

Harry can’t be sure in his state, but he thinks Riddle sounds impressed. “He didn’t know what he was looking for. He spent last week convinced I was blackmailed by Umbridge.”

“And how did he reach that conclusion?”

“Might’ve helped him along,” Harry freely admits.

Riddle grins briefly before a puzzled furrow takes over. “Alright, you didn’t tell Snape, even to put an end to a week of mild torture, but you trust Dumbledore. You must’ve told him.”

“Why the hell would I tell Dumbledore?” Harry rubs his head. His sluggish thoughts are not up for the usual quick twists and leaps of logic.

“Why–? Merlin, you’re unbearable like this. Let me help.”

“You can’t. I tried reducing inflammation and muting pain receptors. Nothing worked.”

“The symptoms are psychosomatic, not physical. Same as the cruciatus. Spells to treat symptoms don’t actually address the problem. I can fix it.”

Harry squints at Riddle. “How?”

“The same way the damage was done – legilimency.”

“I’m not giving you free rein to my head.”

“I don’t need it. I only need a crack so I can inspect your shields – those are the stress concentration points. I may see some surface thoughts, nothing more.”

Harry narrows his eyes. The last time his shields slipped, Riddle tried to sniff out his secrets. It’d be a risk with no reward, except the pain hasn’t lifted in several hours. It if goes on much longer, he won’t be able to sleep, he’ll be useless in training tomorrow, and Snape will set in on him again. The cycle will repeat but it will be worse when he’s tired.

“Okay.”

Without preamble, Riddle sits close enough to be just about in Harry’s lap, and levers Harry upright. Harry’s head feels weirdly disconnected from his body and he must squeeze his eyes shut until the roiling room settles.

“Look at me,” Riddle says.

Harry takes a deep breath and braces for the pain. If Snape tries an attack when Harry is this sore, it feels like he is driving a rusty nail through his eye.

The pain doesn’t come. It is a gentle trickle, cool water on a burn. Harry groans and goes limp. Riddle chuckles and hooks warm fingers behind his head to lift it back up. “Eye contact, Harry.”

Harry stares helplessly into brown as Riddle does as he said he would, tracing the walls instead of trying to breach them, smothering the pain in his wake.

“Did you tell anyone about my legilimency?”

The answer flashes to the forefront of Harry’s mind.

Riddle blinks. “You didn’t. You’re actually telling the truth.”

“And you’re still sneaky,” Harry says, too relieved to be annoyed. It’s not as if it was an important secret, or a secret at all. Riddle just didn’t believe him.

“You didn’t tell anyone,” Riddle repeats.

Harry's higher thought processes are coming back online. He can see, now, that Riddle is shocked, far more than Harry thinks is warranted. "Was I supposed to?"

"I expected you to," Riddle snaps. "That is what people do." He drops Harry like he is yesterday's laundry. Harry flops back to the couch and by the time he extracts himself from the blackhole between the cushions, Riddle is up and pacing, working frustration and confusion up into a true lather. "Why wouldn't you? I didn't make you swear a vow or threaten you to silence. I barely asked you to keep it a secret. I even told you Dumbledore is an occlumens, so it should have occurred to you–" Riddle stops pacing abruptly, spinning to stare. "Dumbledore would have kept your indiscretion a secret from me – you realised that, yes?"

"I – yeah, it crossed my mind."

"Then it couldn't be the potential consequences which scared you."

Harry shrugs helplessly. "I thought you didn't want me to tell anyone."

Riddle slashes his hand through the air. "That's not how it works. People aren't trustworthy." One curved eyebrow demands answers.

Harry has got nothing. His brain is spinning up to speed again, but it feels like Riddle put him back together without some crucial pieces. He is too confused. Did Riddle want him to spread the word around? If so, why not do it himself? And why call it a betrayal if that's what he wanted? Harry doesn't know where to begin to straighten it out.

Riddle paces until Harry is worried he will carve a groove in the floor. He glances over at Harry periodically, and each look appears to renew his outrage at Harry's state of existence.

After five minutes and no sign of slowing down, Harry calls Dobby for tea and settles in to wait.

It is half an hour before Riddle calms down. Or sorts out his problem. Harry is not sure 'calm' is the right way to describe the boy who slumps into the chair across from him.

"Well, that's it then. On to plan B," Tom says.

"Care to share the enlightenment?"

“No,” Riddle glares. “You’ve utterly ruined my scheme. I hope you’re happy.”

“I am confused. Tell me this, at least – do you want me to spread it around or not?”

“Tell no one.”

“Alright. I’m going to have to assume there’s no reverse psychology in there for the sake of my sanity.”

“And I’ll just believe you’re good for your word,” Riddle shoots back, a note of incredulity leaking through.

Harry’s brows pinch in concern but before he can ask, Riddle lets out a gusty sigh. Then he stands, sighs again, and stomps to the portrait hole.

“You’re going back out this late?”

“I’ve got work to do. Plan B won’t sort itself out. These things take *time* and *effort* which is sometimes *ruined in a moment* –” but the portrait closes behind him. It is safe to assume he is still ranting.

…

Riddle’s behaviour flips like a switch.

The flirting stops. The first day, Harry figured it was because Riddle was still pissed off. Riddle’s patience is certainly on a hair-trigger – he earnt a frivolous detention from Umbridge for backchat. Harry hardly saw him all day and suspected Riddle was avoiding him, but Riddle hung around in the common room after detention and he wasn’t any more of an arse than usual. Riddle is pissed, but not with Harry, or at least not enough to take it out on him.

The second day, Harry’s guess is that Riddle is too distracted for fake flirting. Tom was certainly busy. No one saw him in classes or meals – rumour has it he was with his mentor Barty Crouch all day. But he is not distracted with Harry. Whenever he is with Harry, Harry has his full attention.

It’s when three days pass without Riddle trying to persuade him to duel that Harry *knows* something is up, which is when he begins to suspect the insistence on duelling was part of Plan A. Just the insistence, mind you – Harry is certain Riddle still wants to duel, but

he has stopped asking. It is the same with the flirting. Riddle is seeking him out, still interested, but it is clear the joke is over. Either because Riddle is over it, or because it is no longer a joke, as the dangerous and insidious voice in Harry's heart whispers. Harry tries to ignore his heart, but it is loudest in the last moments before he falls asleep, camouflaged alongside the foolish hope they might all escape the Games alive. Distraction helps, so Harry focuses on figuring out Riddle's plans. Whatever he is up to is probably nothing good.

Harry isn't sure he can figure it out, is the thing. If Plan A did somehow involve a flirting game, an incessant duelling challenge, and all hinged on Harry spilling a secret he wasn't supposed to share, well, Harry is mighty curious what sort of madness could be included in Plan B. He watches Riddle closely, but his behaviour doesn't reveal any more clues. Riddle still pals around with the Supremacists, Bellatrix hanging off his arm, and treats everyone civilly.

Whatever is going on is happening behind the closed doors of his mentors training room. If only Harry had his invisibility cloak. He would hide in a corner in his animagus form, if there was only a slight risk of being discovered, but it is practically a guarantee unless he can prevent Riddle sensing his mind or shields. Harry is itching to get in there, and he's not the only one. Umbridge tries one of her mentor inspections on Crouch, and she refuses to be drawn away by the ever recurring and conveniently timed firework emergency.

The next day, she is beset by a howler. It reads out in the slow robotic voice of a dict-a-quill, "Cross-species relationships between humans and other beings, taboo or reality? Chapter 1: What is a being? Witch, wizard, and werewolf. Giant, goblin, and ghost…"

A slow smile spreads across Harry's face. He recognises the title. It is a well-informed treatise on the biology of all sapient species and crossbreeds. It pits prejudice against case studies, doesn't shirk away from realistic risks but informs the reader how people have successfully mitigated them. Sirius gifted it to Remus for Christmas one year, then he bought a second copy to have framed when Remus unwound enough to start dating.

Harry has to admire how perfectly targeted the attack is. The more conservative Ministry officials and champions only frown and argue amongst themselves, disagreeing with the topic, but the book is too dry to really rile anyone up. Umbridge, though? She *seethes* through the first chapter.

There is no point trying to silence it. Howlers are downright immortal until they finish reading their letter. Any spell damage warps their message to make them worse – usually this means they get angrier, but this one didn't start angry, so Harry isn't sure what will happen. She will have to wait it out.

The Howler continues long past the time any sensible person would have given up writing it by hand. Harry does not think this was the work of a sensible person. He thinks an ingenious and vindictive person who shall not be named found a way to set a dict-a-quill running all night to transcribe the entire book. It is a very long book; it could take days for the howler to get through at the droning pace.

Umbridge holds out longer than Harry thought she would. She turns red, then purple, but finally, *Silencio!*"

Every conversation pauses as people try to anticipate how this disaster will unfold.

The howler says, "When a human and a werewolf love each other very much –"

Startled snickering briefly drowns it out.

"*Incendio!*" Umbridge shrieks.

"Oh, that won't do. Fiendfyre, at least," Tom murmurs and props his head on his fist to enjoy the show.

The smouldering envelope spits out a mouthful of embers along with its next words and Umbridge almost topples backwards off her seat. She rights herself and swats at it, but no matter where she goes, the howler follows.

Then Harry notices the skull and snake symbol carved into her chair. A bolt of pure heat goes through him. It is artistry akin to a Wronski feint, and just watching someone pull off a manoeuvre, knowing it would be suicide to almost anyone lacking the skill, is such a rush. The *audacity*. Merlin, Harry wants to kiss him. But more than that, he wants to provoke him. Harry leans over, murmurs, "Quite daring, that. Almost a Gryffindor thing to do."

"Could've been those pesky Weasley twins," Riddle says with the tiniest of smirks. "Perhaps they found a way around the owl wards. That's one of their symbols of rebellion, isn't it?"

It might fool the spectators, but Harry lets it slide. Infamy won't be bad for their business, and if the Ministry try to follow up with charges for disrupting the peace the investigation will fall flat on its face because the culprit is right here.

Four spells later, the howler has shifted genre quite thoroughly. The case studies read like love letters, embellished with the most florid of prose.

Harry's shoulders are shaking and he's making no effort to hide it. He doesn't need to – he is hardly the only one laughing.

Riddle isn't. He is radiating disapproval. Harry would be convinced if he didn't know better.

"Why don't the aurors do something?" Riddle asks.

Harry narrows his eyes. Riddle must know. If it's obvious to Harry, the more politically savvy could pick it up in their sleep. The officials want to help, but they can only watch as the figurative runaway train builds speed. They all know Umbridge will regret it, even she must know, she is just too incensed to care. But no one has the authority to stop her. She does not accept orders or even suggestions from underlings, so the aurors dare not offer any. Riddle must know this. He is still performing. Why? Harry's eyes flick to the omnioculars, considering. It will take more that this incident to sink Umbridge's reputation. Nonetheless, it appears to be exactly what Riddle is trying to do.

"Highly unprofessional conduct," Tom says.

Harry sucks in a startled breath. That one sentence is the most dangerous thing he has done yet. Tom is criticising the High Inquisitor. This in itself is nothing new, but Riddle was always particularly careful to keep the omnioculars away when he and Harry complained about her, mindful of his approval ratings and sponsorships and *life*, because in Hogwarts, Umbridge *is* the Ministry. Riddle is a hair's breadth from criticising the regime itself.

Harry's heart ratchets up another gear. He isn't sure Riddle can pull this one off. Maybe being a Supremacist will give him enough leeway. Maybe he is relying on the ambiguity – his words could refer to the aurors or Umbridge's leadership of them or Umbridge herself. The Blood Supremacists do not fall out of their chairs in shock hearing his words, so if Harry is to gauge other fanatics by these fanatics, they may be too horrified by Umbridge embarrassing the Ministry to

retaliate on anyone observing the same.

Harry isn't sure it's enough. Riddle will surely have weighed the chances, but Harry can't check the sums – this level of political machination is beyond him.

"Harry, you might want to escort Bones and Görder out before Umbridge shifts the genre off romance. Unless you want to bet whether it'll go to poetry or erotica next," Riddle says over the din.

"Shit," Harry says. "Yes, come on you two. Don't give me that look – I don't care if your parents say you're old enough to kill a man, you're not old enough for porn."

…

Umbridge is sequestered in her room for two days. If Riddle's disappointment is any indication, the howler didn't reach its full potential, but there are a dozen previous Blood Supremacist victors which would be open to a spot of fiendfyre. Crimes aren't illegal when they're endorsed by the state.

But for two days, Riddle continues his mysterious plotting in peace. Harry wants to know what's going on, but he does not want to face Riddle's retribution. He quizzes the ghosts, portraits, and house elves to figure out which rooms Riddle and Crouch are using, and while they're at breakfast he surveys the rooms from the outside windows. The rooms are innocuous – no equipment, no plans conveniently lying around, no crazy red string.

Harry needs a way to hide his mind from a legilimens. He spends the rest of the day researching, mostly in the library, but some of it is decidedly more experimental. Snape flatly asks what the hell Harry thinks he's doing with his shields now. Harry says he's trying to make his mind invisible so Snape can't even attack it. Snape calls him an idiot, which probably means he thinks it's impossible, either for Harry specifically or more generally, but Harry isn't going to ask because the next questions will get a whole lot more suspicious.

If there is a solution, Harry doesn't find it. *Hermione* doesn't find it, which is a lot more damning. Three days of late nights hunched over the library tables by candlelight amount to nothing, and on Thursday, Riddle returns to classes. It is just the spell range at first, which could be nothing more than Riddle keeping his eye in, but when he strolls through the door into Moody's latest seminar on cursed fire – a class Riddle could probably *teach* – Harry realises the opportunity is lost.

The urgent planning is over.

“An imperius can last indefinitely, but a silencing charm will need to be recast every hour. Why?” Moody barks out.

Harry frowns. Indefinitely? Really? That doesn’t make sense. Spells need energy to keep working.

“Riddle!” Moody volunteers.

“The imperius is dark,” Riddle answers, sounding like he’d prefer to be consulted for more challenging questions.

“And why does the difference between light and dark magic matter?” Moody reaches the wall and his cloak flares when he spins and starts pacing back.

Riddle tracks his movements lazily, this task also worth the bare minimum effort. “Light magic emits energy into its surroundings. Dark magic consumes energy from its surroundings. After the initial investment to start the spell, dark magic is self-sustaining.”

“Correct! You are all familiar with the effects. Give me examples.”

Hermione raises her hand. “Sir, do you mean to say all runes and enchanted objects are technically dark?”

“Not all – only the ones that work without being routinely charged or activated. A bewitched teapot that needs to be tapped by a wand to start boiling, no, that isn’t dark magic, but a ring enchanted to passively detect poisons is.”

“Um, but I thought dark spells were designed to hurt,” Amelia says.

“Any spell is harmful if you’re creative enough, so intention is hardly a solid trait to distinguish between types of magic, is it?”

“All curses are dark magic,” Harry says. Moody whirls on him next. Harry raises his chin. Maybe some dark magic can be used for good, but Harry isn’t stupid. He knows that dark magic used to be a lot more stigmatised before a bona fide Dark Lord became the Minister. It’s especially telling that, despite the governments total control over education and the media, dark magic still has an image problem.

“Because they’re harmful?” Moody ask, unsure if Harry is being insolent or offering a genuine answer.

Harry can do both. “Because curses need to be broken. They can persist without the caster reinforcing them and they don’t fade over time, so they fit your definition. If their possible uses are almost exclusively harmful, I’m sure that’s just a coincidence.”

Moody’s lips twitch. If it is amusement, it looks terrifying on his face.

“All curses are dark spells, but not all dark spells are curses,” comes from a different direction.

“Go on, Riddle,” Moody says. “Give me a dark spell that people use regularly and benignly.”

“The permanent sticking charm,” Riddle tells Harry.

“Oh, here they go again,” Roger mutters.

“I’m not sure,” Harry says. “I know a few cases where the charm might be fuelled entirely by spite, background magic be damned.”

“Oh, you want a more beneficial spell? The doubling charm. It was first used for publishing books. It decentralised knowledge from the elite, spread education to all classes. Next, it revolutionised manufacturing. The spell is the origin of copyright, since the duplicates themselves cannot be copied, the prototype is much more valuable. This means authors and inventors still get paid, and our economy does not crash due to a flood of devalued products. In fact, it is essential to cast the doubling charm at some point in the process. If a shop creates and sells an item which is *not* a duplicate, then patrons need never visit that shop again.”

Harry opens his mouth, but Riddle isn’t finished.

“And, yes, the spell can be placed on an object as a curse that is triggered by touch, as a security feature to protect a prototype or as a bizarre murder attempt, but there are more straightforward ways to deter thieves or kill people. I think you can agree the main use of the spell is not harmful.”

“Not *innately* harmful, perhaps,” Harry says. “But dark magic is much better at causing harm than light magic, so if a wizard wants to do harm effectively, he’ll reach for dark magic.”

“True, the entrail-expelling curse has very limited recreational applications, but as I said – not all dark spells are curses. All curses *happen* to be dark because people who wish to do harm choose to

make use of the permanence of dark magic."

"The permanence is precisely why it is more dangerous. Counter-curses are usually more difficult than the curses themselves, and I know many that can only be cancelled by the caster – the permanent sticking charm, for one. If the caster can't or won't counter the spell, that's it."

"The staying power of dark spells is why they are useful," Riddle shoots back. "Finite incantatem reverses spells by cutting off the energy required to sustain their effect, smothering them. It works on most light spells, which is an incredible limitation of the entire branch. Imagine if every time you cast finite, you cancelled any space-expansion charms, ruined your grandmother's enchanted silverware, un-animated your chess set, and vanished all your clothes and belongings because they are duplicates."

"I never said they're not useful, I said they're dangerous. And so did you, earlier – dark magic is self-sustaining. You could start a ball rolling that you might not be able to stop."

"Only if you don't know what you're doing."

"Aye, so you'd better know what you're doing," Moody says.

Harry twitches, abruptly reminded they're in company.

"If we could return to the lesson, now that you've stumbled on the point," Moody raises a brow so high, Harry is worried his eye will pop right out of his head. "Some dark spells are infamous for being nigh uncontrollable, but there's always someone who'll try anyway. We'll teach you control, so you don't burn down the whole damn arena."

Harry's hair stands on end. He has a bad feeling he knows where this is going.

"I'm talking about Fiendfyre, of course. We will not be teaching you how to cast it." The Blood Supremacists are smirking. Moody glares at them. "I am aware that many of you *think* you know how already. None of you should try it. It's a bloody stupid thing to do. The flames consume everything, and that's when it's under control. Half the time, the first person it kills is the idiot who cast it, but that isn't enough to stop it. There is a counter-curse, which we'll teach after lunch, but it takes a dozen people or more, depending on the size of the fire. That spell, if it gets too out of control, could conceivably end the world. So just don't."

Bellatrix does not look deterred. She might actually be crazier than Harry thought.

“There is a spell that gets similarly out of control but has less potential to end the world,” Moody says and, yes, that does sound like his usual version of training wheels. “It’s a dark variation of the shield charm, Protego diabolica. It summons flames that attack any unfriendly people or spells that try to pass through it. Ah – wand away, Black! I will not have the lot of you trying it all at once. Sort yourselves into a line behind the barriers.”

The barrier is more like a transparent bunker, not that Harry is complaining.

“You’ve got to toe the line with dark magic. There are warning signs it’s about to go pear shaped and you’d best heed them,” Moody says. “You shouldn’t feel any heat from your own fire. If you start to feel a bit toasty, try to rein it in.”

Hermione does not rush to the front to volunteer, as she usually would, lest she find herself surrounded by Bellatrix and co. She hangs back between Harry and Krum. Krum watches her fingers curl in her sleeves. “Have you cast this before?”

“No,” Hermione says. “I’ve read about it, of course. Which put me off ever trying it.”

“It cannot go very wrong when you are supervised,” Krum says. He does not tell her she will be fine.

Bellatrix shoves Romanov out of the way to go first. She bounces up and down as she slashes a line in front of her. A wall of flames roars to the ceiling. It is the inverse of fire, blue flickering tips where is should be red, black at the hot base instead of white. After a moment, they twist like ropes – no, like snakes.

The snake lashes out at Moody, and by the time it reaches him it is a shark, and it splashes over his gold shield. Nasty spell if it takes protego horribilis to counter it.

“Good, Black. Now bring it down to an ember.”

“Oh, five more minutes!” she says, clapping as a flaming wild boar careens around the room. Stoeva woops.

“No, now, Black!”

“Ugh, fine.”

Harry blinks rapidly to adjust to the sudden darkness. Stoeva steps up next.

“Calm your heart,” Krum murmurs. “If you are excited, the flames are bigger and more frightening.”

“Which makes you more panicked, which makes the flames bigger. Yes, the feedback loop is what worries me,” Hermione says.

“Not here. If the flames get bigger the trainers will smother it,” Krum says.

Harry rubs between her shoulder blades, there and gone before the omnioculars catch him breaking the rules. There is a lot in that touch: belief, reassurance, a grounding reminder he is there for her.

She takes a steadier breath.

“Yes,” Krum says. “Slow your breathing to slow your heart. A slower heart pumps less stress signals through the body.”

The information helps. Hermione has never encountered a problem she hasn’t learnt enough to control. Information makes anything seem manageable, and her formidable determination takes care of the rest.

After all the Supremacists take a crack at the spell, the room is swelteringly hot. Harry is sweating through his shirt. The nervous students make it worse. The flames get away from Aubert and she goes to the back of the line on shaking legs, but only for a minute, then she’s off to Pomfrey for a calming draught.

The Durmstrang champions are clearly familiar with this sort of magic. Even Görder and Ivankova produce a small but controlled shield, but they don’t hold a candle to Krum. He confidently directs a small vortex of fiery eagles, hawks, and falcons.

He gives Hermione a reassuring nod when he cedes the stage to her. She is steady which means she gets to keep both her eyebrows.

Then it is Harry’s turn. He ducks out of the bunker and steps into the ring of trainers. Moody gives him the signal.

“*Protego diabolica*.”

The spell rushes out of his wand with the eagerness of a curse, but a

curse only lasts a moment – this feeling doesn't stop. It is a dog pulling at a leash, then it is literally a dog. Harry pulls back and the dog disappears into a tame campfire.

"Felt the heat, did you?" Moody says.

Harry takes stock. He'd acted on instinct, yes, but not a pain reflex. It just felt wrong, letting the magic run off on its own. "No. It wasn't getting away from me."

Moody frowns. "Well, you've got the control down. Let's see you produce a larger shield if you think you can manage it."

Harry is not entirely sure how to do that. He tries the good old swish and flick, tracing out a larger path for it to spread along. It moves slowly, almost sullenly, and the flames never climb higher than his shins.

Laughter echoes from the bunker. Harry ignores it.

The fire wants to spread, he can feel it. He gives it permission to get bigger, wills it to grow. It does, reluctantly, reach hip height. There are no animals or whips lashing out.

Moody hums. "Show of hands, who can feel the heat off Potter's fire?"

No one moves. Well, Bellatrix cackles, but that doesn't count.

Moody rolls his eyes skyward. "Right. Learning experience – someone tell me how the spell judges friend from foe?"

"Loyalty from the target to the caster?" Amelia says.

"From Black to Harry?" Roger scoffs.

Amelia blushes and protests, "Minister Grindelwald once used diabolica as a loyalty test! And Black could be lying about not feeling heat to make Harry look weak."

Harry cuts in before Roger can retort. "If it's a shield spell, then it repels threats."

"But what makes a person an enemy – is it subjective or objective?" Roger wonders.

Harry's heart skips a beat. The Supremacists are too far away to pose a serious threat, even if they worked together, given how quickly Harry

could escape if he needed to. If the spell is judging the current danger level, it's going to tell them a lot more about his skill level than he wants them to know.

"Subjective," Moody says, and Harry's breath rushes out in relief. "The flames can lash out against temporary opponents, such as a sparring partner, not just a nemesis." Moody's look says Harry is clearly daft. "You have enemies and opponents in here, Potter."

"In a classroom? We're not in the duelling ring or the arena. Those are different situations entirely," Harry raises an eyebrow gormlessly, because that is the second reasons he doesn't see them as a threat right now, and he doesn't want them guessing the first.

"You keep saying that. It doesn't fill me with confidence," Moody says. "Away with you. Diggory!"

Harry ends the spell, cuts off the strange rush of eager-but-reluctant power, and shudders at the loss. He rejoins Krum and Hermione, but they are not left alone for long.

Tom steps up beside him. He crosses his arms and they both watch Cedric perform the spell shakily. "It's not going to work for you in the arena," he says.

"I'm good at compartmentalisation. Not seeing everyone as a threat here doesn't mean I'm going to just lay down and die out there."

Riddle hums. "That isn't the only reason the fire didn't lash out the way it should."

Harry looks over sharply.

"You have exceptional self-control and awareness. You excel at the aspects important for damping dark magic, but to let it grow… You treated it as a push-pull, spell, didn't you? Push it higher or pull it back," Riddle says with a knowing glint in his eye. "Giving it a push is still exerting control. You can't control chaos. If you succeed, then it is not chaos, and it cannot be truly self-sustaining."

Harry narrows his eyes. This sudden turn towards altruism is unlike Riddle. If it is solid advice, he must have an ulterior motive. Facing Harry's suspicion, Tom raises an eyebrow at Krum.

Krum nods. "It is true. You must be confident but also– which is the word?"

“Brash. You need to relax your control,” Riddle says.

“And you just felt a pressing need to be helpful this morning?” Harry says.

“Maybe I want to make the most of our inevitable duel,” Riddle grins. “You are thoroughly incompatible with dark spells. But if you do figure out the balance, your formidable self-control could let you master magic so powerful it would consume almost any other wizard. It would be something to behold.”

Riddle’s gaze has weight, pinning Harry like an insect. Having Riddle’s belief and regard warms him deep to his core, at the same time it chills him. Harry is not sure he wants to live up to his expectations. He doesn’t want to know if he can play with that kind of fire.

“Shall we see how well I compartmentalise?” Riddle says.

“Huh?” is all Harry can manage.

Riddle steps away. He draws his wand as he strolls out of the bunker, holding it down by his side to trail a black line. The fire fans out behind him. It is so low to the ground it looks innocuous as spilt ink. Or it would, if not for the ripples and the knobs rising from the surface where a crocodile lurks. There is nothing funny about Riddle’s tiny flames.

“May I?” Riddle asks, unconcerned by the flames nipping at is heels.

A visibly tense and wary Moody gives permission. The trainers cast pre-emptive shields.

Harry is braced for a sudden explosion of light and heat, some dramatic show of power. That isn’t what happens.

A wave of Riddle’s hand and the ripples grow and merge into a twisting carpet of snakes. They slither to the centre of the room and condense into a merry bonfire, casting bright sparks up to the ceiling. The sparks don’t fade away. They flutter and fly, forming dozens of tiny creatures in the air.

One approaches, and Hermione and Krum flinch back from the heat. It alights on the bunker in front of Harry. If he squints, he can see it is a moth.

Harry’s palms are sweaty, his mouth is dry, but not due to the heat.

He feels the comfortable warmth of the summer sun. In a moment of morbid curiosity, he wants to touch it to see if it will burn him. He doesn't know what it would prove.

He meets Riddle's eyes. "You know dark magic is dangerous, but will you concede it can also be beautiful?"

"This is beautiful, yes. But so are explosions depending on what they're used for," Harry says. "Big difference, say, if an explosion is at a New Years celebration or inside a hospital lobby."

"And what do you think this is for?"

That's what Harry would like to know. Some instinct makes him look over his shoulder, but Hermione is further away than he'd assumed. She is plastered against the cool stone walls along with everyone else. A mixture of guarded expressions look back.

"Compartmentalisation, hmm?" Harry narrows his eyes. "You're up to mind games, clearly. I think the better question is: are you messing with me or them?"

Riddle grins and in and instant, the flames are gone.

Chapter End Notes

> I've decided to allow this fic up to be added to collections. Please don't post it on any other sites.
>
> I actually don't read much Tom/Harry. I like me a manipulative and vicious Tom, so most versions of the relationship are very toxic. I'll read nasty relationships if they're interesting, but it creeps me out when the author is trying to convince me that the possessiveness makes their love more romantic. It is so hard to find Tom/Harry dynamic that I like that I basically stopped looking, which means I could've missed this gem: Too old to be this young by Nadia_Castillo. If you like this story you'll love that one.

Week 5 day four, five, six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Hem hem.” The irritating cough may serve a purpose, for once. Umbridge must’ve lost her voice shouting at the howler, because even now back from her confinement, she sounds appropriately croaky. “We, the Ministry, have been lenient. We have been patient. But in light of recent disruptions, it is clear some of you are not behaving in a manner befitting the honour you have been granted. You think you can hide. We will find the troublemakers. We will find everyone aiding them. By new decree, if you are hiding information on a champion violating a decree and you do not come forward, be you a champion, mentor, or trainer, you will be considered a conspirator and subject to the same punishment.”

Harry glances at the mentors’ table. McGonagall is watching Umbridge severely. Snape is ignoring her with just as much focus. Harry doesn’t think he has to worry about them turning him in.

“There are going to be some changes around here. First, I intend to address your exposure to negative influences. All literature written by half-breeds and werewolves is henceforth banned for promoting unconformity. It takes maturity to parse undesirable information in a productive manner – a level of maturity which I find lacking in many of you. See the notice board for the full list of banned titles. All aurors henceforth have the authority to inspect and confiscate reading material. You are dismissed.”

…

The book ban is not popular. Trelawny is the first to be caught out, after centaurs are added to the list.

“He wasn’t even the author,” she complains after she spent the afternoon dusting Umbridge’s plates. “Or the focus of the book. He was interviewed for one chapter on alternative perspectives in astrology. It’s a foundational text!”

“There are hundreds of books on that list, how are we supposed to remember them all?” Delacour says. She has a pile of books of her own, and she runs her finger along the titles. “Pauline Henderson –

she sounds British, do you know if she is a witch?"

"You're probably safe. The Hendersons are related to the Yaxleys," Cedric says absently as he double checks his own title. "Umbridge should move the books into the restricted section if she doesn't want us to read them."

Harry snorts. "She cares more about catching people breaking the rules than she does about whether it was an accident."

Moments after Harry returns from the shelves to see if he can find a more reliable source to back up GJ Lockhart's assertion that inferi can be killed by a wooden stake, the auror is back.

"Mr Potter," he demands, hand outstretched. Harry gives him the book and the auror flicks through it. He hems and haws for several minutes. Harry taps his fingers and resists the urge to point out that the title is on the outside cover and a mere six words.

"Acceptable." The auror hands it back.

Cedric watches the auror leave out of the corner of his eye. "I don't suppose they only work nine to five?"

The table heaves a collective groan.

…

Harry steps into his room and freezes. Draws are open, their contents dumped on the bed. The desk and wardrobe have been pulled away from the wall. Even the rug has been moved.

Harry's fingers itch for his wand. He flicks a silent shield around himself. He checks the bathroom and under the bed, but there is no one lying in wait.

There is a knock and Harry whirls around.

"Harry?" It sounds like Cedric. "Did someone go through your room?"

He strides over and flings the door open. Cedric only has to look over his shoulder for confirmation. "You too?"

Cedric nods. "I'm going to have a word with the auror, see if he noticed anything."

They clatter down the stairs, but it turns out there is no need.

"… a routine search for contraband."

"It is a clear violation of the statute for providing champions with safe lodgings," Hermione says.

"Qualified aurors conducted the searches. We are here for your protection."

"Vandalism is an act of aggression. You tore down my hangings! Who keeps a book on the upper frame of a fourposter?"

Cedric goes straight to an upset Amelia. With the young girl in good hands, and Hermione sorting out the interrogation, Harry goes to the last figure leaning on the back of an armchair. "Did yours too, huh?"

"They did everyone," Tom says.

No doubt, there is one book in particular they are looking for. They won't find it, Harry knows. Riddle is too meticulous to let anything tie him to the howler.

"I notice Bellatrix isn't down here."

"Mhmm. They carefully inspected, no doubt, for anything visible from her doorway."

Harry rolls his eyes. Across the room, Hermione isn't making much progress seeking an apology, and if Riddle isn't even trying, then he doesn't fancy her chances. Riddle certainly isn't holding back due to indifference. There is something in his stance, some rising irritation that sets Harry's hair on end.

Over the next few days, that irritation quickly gains teeth.

Umbridge is still determined to figure out what Tom is up to with his mentor, so he simply waits until she is busy elsewhere before he disappears for several hours at a stretch. It only maker her more determined to pry into his business. And because he is also spending more time in the library, there is no shortage of opportunities.

Riddle is singularly responsible for adding vampires to the undesirable authors list. Also sirens, goblins from four separate rebellions, and the first witch elected as minister, Artemisia Lufkin. The last, Umbridge may disapprove of because she legitimately won the popular vote twice, which is more than Grindelwald can claim.

While Umbridge is deciding whether to be offending by Riddle reading *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu – the seventh book she has checked that day – he loses patience. “As you wish, I will read something more appropriate.” He switches from the Defence to the Genealogy section. “Something written by the best, about the best.”

He returns with a book about the sprawling branches of the sacred twenty-eight families, and opens it near the midline.

“Hmm, Selwyn. Known to be a very widespread family which has intermarried into most other purebred lines. Just as well this is a recent edition,” Tom continues conversationally as Umbridge’s smile turns stale. “Many of the remote branches of the Selwyn family lost contact in the dark ages after the family records were destroyed in a fiendfyre accident. Many have only been re-established recently, you know.”

“Detention, Mr Riddle! For being noisy in the library.”

Riddle goes still and alert in the way of a predator spotting a limp. “Yes, you were right, this book was very informative.”

Harry doesn’t want to know and ducks behind a disturbingly thick tome on the different dragon species.

…

If Riddle learns anything from his detention, it is that his greatest desire in life is to avoid getting another one while still driving Umbridge up the wall.

Tom is showing (off) Harry a runic array, heads bent close together, when one end of a tape measure almost goes up Harry’s nose.

Bellatrix looks to Umbridge in anticipation. She seems to be under the impression Riddle is trying to get Harry in trouble, which is probably the only reason she accepts him paying more attention to Harry than her.

“Six and a half inches,” the tape measure announces, for the fifth time in the last hour. Either Riddle has some kind of uncanny spatial awareness, or magic is at work. Umbridge’s fists clench, briefly turning her into a stiff, furious statue. Harry ducks low over the runes to hide his grin.

“Right then,” Umbridge says, scribbling furiously. She edits the Decree

on the spot and signs in triplicate.

“There!” she declares. “Now champions are to remain three feet apart!”

Riddle takes one precise step back. The tape measure shoots out again. “Thirty-six and three fourteenths of an inch,” the shrill voice says. Umbridge tears a hole in her parchment, quill quivering in a white knuckled grip.

“Seventy-seven hundredths the length of the knight bus,” Riddle tells Harry with an expression of premeditated innocence, “or one-hundred and eight barleycorns and two poppyseeds.”

Harry can’t account for how delighted he is to see the boy he knows in private leaking through. The shiny veneer of being a docile champion is rubbing off, and there isn’t anyone who deserves the full force of an irritated Tom Riddle more than Umbridge. Harry takes deep breaths until he is certain he can manage something milder than delight. “Those last few poppyseeds would make it… hmm, just over three feet, I reckon.”

“Well, if you want to use less precise units,” says Riddle.

“I believe the invention of the decimals solved the precision issue.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Civilised wizards do not use fractions of an inch unless they are presented in the form of smaller grains. Barleycorns are sufficient in most cases, and a barleycorn can be split into four poppy seeds if not, but I am quite certain I’ve never needed to measure anything with more precision than that.”

Harry nods seriously. “An exalted tradition. Our forefathers have been doing it that way for hundreds of years and they ought to know what they’re doing by now.”

“And it wouldn’t do to admit the French might’ve been onto something.”

Umbridge decides they’ve crossed the line into insubordination and puts them in detention for the rest of the day. Or she intends to. An out of breath auror intercepts them en route to the new detention room.

“Madam Inquisitor! A runespoor somehow crossed from its portrait into your plates!”

Umbridge blinks for a moment, then comprehension dawns. “My kittens!”

Her office, from what Harry can see from the doorway behind the age line, is in utter pandemonium. Cats are scrambling in all directions, and they’ve managed to knock some dishes off the walls, which shouldn’t be possible, but cats are a law unto themselves. A team of aurors can’t contain it – they are good for little more than catching plates.

The snake is not difficult to spot – half the plates show nothing but scales. The three heads are exploring two different plates and the picture frame on Umbridge’s desk. Umbridge grabs the photo and shakes it until the last head slides out of frame, but it merely settles in another plate. The snake is too distracted by the cats to notice. The heads have minor disagreement when one wants to go left and the other right to chase a fat tortoiseshell.

“Get rid of it!” Umbridge shrieks.

An auror tries a few spells. “I can’t lock it out, it’s too large.”

His more astute partner notices the colour Umbridge is turning and hurries out the door, “I’ll find a portrait of a magizoologist.”

Riddle steps neatly aside for the auror to flee. Mildly, he asks, “Is this a bad time? Perhaps we should–”

“Don’t you go anywhere!” Umbridge whirls on them with wild eyes. She crosses to her desk and retrieves a black quill. “Out of my way,” she shoves one of the more effectual aurors and the snake head he was distracting quickly snaps up a passing cat. “It that beast is not removed and all my cats back in their proper places by teatime, on your heads be it.”

Then she slams the door, leaving the three of them in the stark silence of the corridor.

“Right then. You thought you would get out of this. You thought you would get away with it.” Umbridge levels a truly poisonous look. Her fingers are white and shaking around her wand, and it takes two attempts to conjure a desk and chair. “Sit, Mr Potter.”

She conjures a second, more comfortable chair. “Not you, Mr Riddle. Stand on the other side of the corridor. This, for future reference, is a more appropriate distance between two young wizards.”

She sets the black quill and parchment on Harry's desk. "Now, you'll be writing lines for me today, Mr Potter."

Harry watches the way Riddle's eyes sharpen. Then he looks down and notices, "You haven't given me any ink."

"Oh, you won't be needing it."

"That is a blood quill," Riddle says flatly.

Harry pauses with one arm outstretched. He has heard of those. He knows Sirius paid a lot of money so Harry didn't have to use one to become his adopted heir, because Sirius couldn't countenance subjecting Harry to even brief pain.

Writing lines could take hours.

"I would have thought mutilation goes against the mandate that champions are to enter the arena without permanent damage from training," Riddle says.

"The mandates are what I say they are. They are interpreted how I choose to interpret them. *I* am the High Inquisitor. I speak for the Ministry."

While her back is turned, Harry grabs the back of his writing hand with his left under the desk. *Leniens*, he casts. He scratches with his nails and can still feel it.

"You, Mr Riddle, speak for no one. You have no family and no power here."

Leniens, he tries again, but it doesn't work. Damn, it must be one of the tricky ones. A lot of left-handed spells require different gestures, with no apparent rhyme or reason to the pattern, as he discovered after a week of frustration and confusion, because he could do the summoning spell left-handed but not the banishing spell though he could do both wandlessly with his right.

"If you keep up your poor behaviour, you can look forward to being the next one writing lines. Yes, I do believe you need to learn the same lesson as Mr Potter, here."

Leniens. The numbing spell doesn't have distinct wand movement, he hopes he can stumble on the left-handed version with only a slight variation. It'll be much harder once he starts writing, due to the pain,

multitasking, and loss of physical contact.

“Mr Potter, you will write ‘I must respect my betters’,” Umbridge says.

“How many times?”

“As many as it takes for the message to sink in.”

She wants it to scar.

Harry pictures her in the duelling ring. He knows how she moves, how she casts. He knows subconsciously, the two-spell combination which would take her down permanently. One spell for Harry’s pleasure, one of behalf of everyone else.

“Stand up straight, Mr Riddle! Do not lean on the walls.”

Leniens.

“Begin.”

Umbridge watches him carve the first few lines into his own hand, a satisfied smile in place. He doesn’t flinch. It hurts more than he expected – not the dull ache of gravel rash, but the crisp sharp pain of a paper cut. The edges tear further when his skin stretches as he moves the quill around the next letter. He writes, it heals, he writes again. His skin is turning pink and inflames between cuts. He uses his messiest handwriting. Instead of forming a defined line, the pink is a blur. He refuses to wear the scar. It doesn’t matter if it hurts more. He is withdrawing behind his occlumency shields, deeper and deeper, beyond physical and emotional sensations, deliberately dissociating.

Harry hardly notices when Umbridge gets bored and returns to her chair and clipboard.

A black dot appears on his parchment. He blinks at it and wonders if his nose is bleeding. He wouldn’t be surprised; occlumency isn’t supposed to be used this way.

The dot moves to the right, streaking into a line with a slight curve. It vanishes a second later. Distantly, Harry realises there are only so many people in this corridor who could be responsible, and it isn’t Umbridge.

Harry writes ‘I must respect my betters’ again.

The dot moves to the left, it wiggles in a sinusoidal pattern. It

vanishes, reappears and repeats itself.

His mind is working strangely. It skips comprehension entirely, acting automatically on some deep instinct; Harry wiggles his fingers in the same pattern. *Leniens*.

The blood quill almost slips out of his suddenly numb fingers.

He should probably come back now, but lifting the occlumency to sensible levels is almost harder than the reverse, as he lacks the determination to do anything. He focuses on the lumpy wooden seat, the smell of blood which seems to stick to his throat, the flash of the omnioculars, the aurors occasionally passing through with portraits and plates, the sound of Riddle's quiet breathing. He comes back, and he realises his hand doesn't hurt at all, but he remembers how much it did, and that is enough to imagine what Umbridge put Görder through in the second week.

Cold fury settles into his bones, and he continues absently writing lines as he starts to plan. This cannot be allowed to happen again. He considers having the quill spontaneously combust in his hands, but it's certainly heavily enchanted so an *incendio* isn't going to cut it. He'll have to get it out of her office to do more powerful magic, which could become complicated if it has an anti-summoning spell on it. Or that spell could be the solution because he could fly it out of her office and drop it in the lake or bury it in the pile of dragon dung fertiliser out back of greenhouse five. He'll need someone inside the castle to disable the alarms on her office – he'll get Hermione on board and do it tonight. He doesn't care if the timing will make him look suspicious, he's not giving Umbridge a chance to use it again. And as far as she's concerned, the age line prevents him getting in her office.

'I must respect my betters' Harry writes again and again. The cut isn't getting deeper – not damaging tendons or bone – but his skin is getting more inflamed with each pass. Harry's healing lessons focus on more immediate threats than scarring, but scars can impair movement or worse, depending on where they form, so Harry knows the inflammation is not a good sign. He knows cursed scars don't heal.

He misspells a few lines and crosses them out. If it must scar, he refuses for it to be legible.

"Don't fidget, Mr Riddle."

Harry glances up. Riddle has been standing for hours, probably, with nothing to do but stare at the top of Harry's head. He must be terribly

uncomfortable and bored.

“Don’t slouch. Uncross your arms.”

Riddle returns to perfect, indolent posture. His fingers tap silently against his leg, not in a spell, Harry thinks, but the movement is reminiscent of how Crookshanks’ tail starts to flick as his tolerance falls.

Harry isn’t sure he’d have the same restraint. If he could vanish Umbridge’s chair and pretend it was her conjuration wearing off, he’d have done it by now. Riddle could do it, or any number of things. He certainly could’ve cast the numbing spell on Harry, which is what Harry would’ve done, if their roles were reversed. Finding a way to teach someone to help themself wouldn’t have even occurred to Harry if he could fix the problem directly. But it occurred to Riddle. Even though it was less straightforward. Even though Harry wouldn’t have thought twice if he didn’t help at all. Even if there was a chance Harry could be less grateful for the complications or blame him for pain due to the delay, or for getting detention in the first place. Even though casting the spell would give Riddle excellent leverage, something he could threaten to take away. Instead, he taught Harry a skill which will make him less dependent on Riddle’s help in the future.

“Focus on your work, Mr Potter,” Umbridge says.

Harry ducks his head and flips over another page.

Detention lasts until dinner, which is short as far as Umbridge’s punishments go, but the witch clearly has more on her mind. From the snippets Harry heard when her door was open, it appears the runespoor has attracted a few slithery friends.

“Your hand, Mr Potter,” Umbridge demands, holding her own out imperiously.

Harry reluctantly rounds her desk and presents his hand. He shudders as she inspects it and twitches with the instinct to pull away or clench down and break her fingers, anything to get her to stop touching him.

The pink marks are lingering, but there’s no shine of scar tissue yet. “Hmm, clearly the message needs more time to make an impression. You will continue tomorrow.”

Yeah, we’ll see about that.

…

Harry sends Dobby to Hermione the moment he gets back to his dorm and wastes not one more second sneaking out. His right wing aches and he flies a few loops of the tower to work the stiffness out, then he flies into the seventh floor through an open window and transforms behind a tapestry.

A shadow darts across the corridor to join him. At a passing glance, it could be a large ginger cat with a bushy tail, but it isn't. The fox transforms into Hermione.

"You should've taken the invisibility ring!" she hisses, shoving it at him. "If she catches you again so soon…"

Harry presses it back. "Fred made it for you."

"I can sneak around just fine without it," Hermione says, but she clutches it carefully.

"Oh yeah, how did you get past the auror in the common room?"

Hermione sniffs. "I could take the pet entrance if I'd had the patience to wait for him to look away. What did Umbridge do, anyway? You were all out of sorts at dinner."

"Had me writing lines with a blood quill," he says. Hermione makes a furious noise and snatches his hand. Her night vision must have improved greatly if she can see anything. Harry gently shakes her off. "It's not bleeding. You summoned the room already?" he ducks his head out for a look.

Hermione yanks him back. "It wasn't me. Someone is already inside. You transform, I'll open the door. Hopefully it's just Viktor again."

"I don't like it."

"I'll wear the ring."

Harry grimaces but can't argue. It's the best plan. He flies into Hermione's mess of hair and when she turns invisible, so does he.

Hermione opens the door a sliver and slips inside.

It isn't Krum.

"Finally," Riddle says, as if they're late to a meeting, or had discussed

this at all. His eyes land unerringly on them. He has laid out the leftover vials of the age-line potion. “What have you got left in your bag of tricks?”

Hermione pulls off the ring and Harry’s view is suddenly obscured by the back of her head and a mane of hair. He burrows through and transforms behind her. Riddle is utterly unsurprised to see him.

“A few big pranks, a few odds and ends. Their utility will depend entirely on what you want to achieve,” Hermione says.

“We’re stealing the blood quill, of course,” Tom eyes the back of Harry’s inflamed hand. “If she tries that on me, I will not be held responsible for my actions.”

“Then our options are to help you commit theft and destruction of magical artifacts now, or conspire to cover up a murder later,” Harry jokes.

“Cute,” Riddle says, “of you to think I’d need help disposing of a body.” His lips quirk, but Harry isn’t sure he’s kidding – rather the opposite, so Harry pulls out the Weasley’s care package.

“There is probably another one of these around the castle somewhere, if this isn’t enough,” Harry says, and starts pulling out products. The box is much lighter without the fireworks. “Portable swamp, tornado in a jar, extendable ears, and a little more instant darkness powder. And these,” Harry pulls a handful of fake wands out, “though I’m not sure how much use they’d be.”

Tom picks up the shortest fake wand and hums thoughtfully. “Dobby.”

The elf pops in, almost landing inside the empty box. “What is you needing, Mr Riddles? Hello, Harry Potter sir!”

“Hi, Dobby.”

“Could you place this in the inside left pocket of Umbridge’s robes without being seen? The third set in her wardrobe should do it.”

“Elves is not allowed to touch a wizard’s wand,” Dobby says.

“These aren’t real wands,” Riddle says. “Look closely. It is an enchanted stick.”

Dobby stretches to his tiptoes, then he nods his head. “Dobby sees it.

And Dobby will not be touching Missus's belongings because the stick is not hers. Dobby can do it!"

He takes the wand and vanishes before Hermione can say, "Oh, be careful!" she glares through the now empty space at Tom. "You shouldn't order him to put himself at risk."

"I didn't order, I asked. He wants to help."

"He'll be okay," Harry tells her. "But that doesn't help us now."

He turns over the jar. He is partial to the tornado. The packaging says it is 'for indoor use only' and 'will grow to fill the available space'. He things the grand staircase should do nicely to test the limits of that claim. As for the swamp – there is a bottleneck to the professors' quarters and Ravenclaw tower which would mean Umbridge has to pass through it to get to bed, but so would all the mentors and trainers, and Harry isn't sure it'd survive long.

"I don't think we should do another big prank," Hermione says. "It'll make her worse."

"We have to act quickly. We need a distraction," Harry says.

"Not necessarily, if we are patient and wait for her to leave."

"The aurors won't be waited out," Riddle says. He too, is eyeing the tornado curiously.

Hermione looks at Harry. He nods slightly, and tells Riddle, "I can get inside from her window if you two disable the wards without the aurors noticing. I could bring the quill back here."

"Not here. Small, valuable items often have locator charms built in," Riddle says. "Take it to the astronomy tower."

"But do you reckon you could manage the wards?"

"Hmm, yes, we could," Riddle says. "But also consider – if we keep her busy enough, she might not realise the quill is missing for a few days. Otherwise, she will notice it's gone as soon as she tries to use it on you tomorrow."

Hermione winces. "And Merlin only knows how she'd take it out on you when she does." She tugs at her hair. "Okay. One prank, then we'll behave for a few days to let her cool off. And I mean really

behave, not the way you two have been carrying on. But not the age lines, I think we should save those. We mightn't be able to brew another batch now that we can't access the greenhouses and the aurors are standing in on Slughorn's lessons and guarding the potions storeroom."

Harry frowns. The storeroom, unfortunately, does not have a window.

"Hmm, yes," Riddle muses, "I would like at least one to lock her *into* a room."

Harry snorts, and the reproachful look Hermione levels them with makes him laugh.

"Relax, I'd set the age young enough for someone to feed her," Tom says, not even attempting to sound convincing. "How old is Dumbledore? A hundred and sixteen?"

"One hundred and *fifteen*."

"Ah, an easy mistake to make," Riddle says. "Excellent."

Hermione huffs. "*Anyway*."

All three turn to the tornado. "We can get the quill tonight, set that off tomorrow," Harry says.

"*Tempus*," Riddle flicks his fingers. It is almost nine. "Umbridge should be leaving soon. She has no more detentions and the aurors have moved the snakes along by now."

"How do you know that?" Harry wonders.

Tom ignores the question. "Give us half an hour after the next bell. May I offer you a disillusionment charm?"

He holds out his hand and Harry takes it automatically. "Yeah, thanks."

Riddle doesn't cast immediately. He turns over Harry's hand and his thumb brushes over the back, checking if the skin is smooth. It tingles, but that has nothing to do with the blood quill.

"Unless you wish to cast it yourself. Just how far have you progressed wandlessly?"

"I'm sure I couldn't tie my own shoes," Harry replies.

“Now, I know that isn’t true,” Riddle says, eyes glittering with new interest. Harry shivers with something that is half dread. He should take his hand back. Was the numbing spell a test of skill – is that why Riddle helped the way he did?

Riddle folds Harry’s fingers into a fist, and the red skin pulls taught and turns white, revealing the damage. His eyes narrow dangerously. Harry stops breathing entirely when Riddle lifts his knuckles to his lips. He lingers there until Harry is lightheaded and Hermione clears her throat. After another long moment, Tom finally drops his gaze, and Harry can look away. And notice that his hand, and indeed the rest of him, is invisible.

Harry doesn’t know what’s going on. This is the first time Riddle has done something overtly flirty all week, except it doesn’t feel like flirting. He seems sincerely angry. Or he has figured out how Harry realised he was faking and gotten better at pretending. Which means Harry won’t be able to tell the difference, going forward.

That is… very bad.

His heart is still hammering behind his ribs, hoping it’s true, aching because it could just be the next iteration of Riddle’s tricks. Harry knows that even if he is not falling for Riddle’s tricks, he is still falling for Riddle.

…

Despite Harry’s distraction, the heist goes flawlessly. He manages to turn human on the windowsill without falling on the third attempt, and unlocking the window is short work after that. He pulls out the quill, grasps it in his claws and flies away. He only has to dart back for it once, but he learns his lesson and continues at a much more sedate pace. Point is, the aurors didn’t come storming in and he remembered to cast a few cleaning spells to clear any trace of him. Flawless.

Tom and Hermione are not far behind him.

“Are you here?” Hermione’s disembodied voice calls.

“Behind the telescopes,” Harry says, and flicks his fingers to hide what is sure to be an incriminating conversation from anyone listening. “*Muffliato*.”

The quill vanishes when she picks it up. That ring really is brilliant magic.

“Locator runes,” she confirms.

A pile a dung is too good for it, then.

“How do we get rid of it?” Hermione asks.

Harry shrugs. “Banish it into the castle wards? It’s Dark enough to be vaporised.”

“Allow me,” Riddle says, but he doesn’t send it flying. “Place it on the ground. And take a step back.”

Harry takes not one, but two. “I swear to Merlin, Riddle, if you try wandless fiendfyre…”

“It is not *that* heavily enchanted,” Riddle says. “*Protego diabolica*.”

Black flames shoot out of midair, almost invisible and cold in the darkness. Their effect is much more apparent; the quill curls in on itself to the crackle of violently destroyed enchantments. Tom stops short of reducing it to ash. He picks it up and twirls it between his fingers. “I think I will hold onto this for a few days.”

“The evidence? Really, Tom, imagine if the aurors found it in your room,” Hermione scolds.

“What are you going to do with it?” Harry thinks is the more salient question.

“Could put it in someone else’s room,” Riddle says, and Harry is suddenly a lot less blasé about letting him keep the scraps. “Or I might leave it pointy side up somewhere for Umbridge to sit on. After she starts looking for it, of course.”

Speaking of. “Meet you in the room at about six tomorrow to set off the next phase? That way we can sneak back to bed for a decent alibi.”

“Alright,” Hermione agrees. “If we’re getting up that early, though, we’d best be off.”

“You go ahead. I’ll fly back,” Harry says.

Hermione sighs. “Don’t either of you stay up too late.”

Her footsteps disappear down the stairs. Harry goes to the railing and looks out. The air is still tonight, even this high up. It doesn’t feel as

cold as it is. He might fly back now, despite Hermione's scepticism. It depends if a second set of footsteps head downstairs. But he doesn't think they will.

It takes Riddle a while to approach the long drop, but a floating feather eventually settles next to Harry. It is a ragged, crispy thing that smells distinctly of burnt sugar. He'll sleep better tonight, seeing it destroyed, but he won't sleep entirely soundly while he is still wondering, "Why are you stepping out against the Ministry, Riddle?"

"Won't you call me Tom? We must be on a first name basis by now."

"No." Harry needs the distance. He is already hopelessly attracted to him. If Harry thinks he can have more, he might start to believe he can have everything. He needs the reminder.

"Fine," Riddle sighs, but he doesn't continue right away. There are mesmerising little clouds forming from his breaths. Harry is startled when the rhythm is interrupted. "I'm moving against Umbridge because I want to and because I can get away with it."

"You might not get caught in open rebellion," Harry says, because Riddle is certainly sly enough, "but you are blatantly provoking her. The Ministry won't like your attitude."

"Ah, but provoking her – that's where there is leeway. Umbridge is useful to a few very powerful people, so everyone else must tolerate her. No one likes her. Not her colleagues and especially not her subordinates. The spectators won't, either. She is blatantly unfair, and people do not like seeing that, and so most people can sympathise with my…"

"Vendetta?"

"Disagreement."

Harry snorts. "Understatement."

"Unimportant," Tom waves away the semantics; Harry feels it in the air currents that caresses his cheek. "People like to believe competitions are fair. That is why it is called the Games, didn't you know? It's in the word – sport is supposed to be *sporting*."

"Everyone knows it's rigged."

"Oh, it's worse than you or they realise – it is scripted," Riddle says.

“Victors don’t earn sponsors; sponsors pick the victor.”

Harry closes his eyes. Yeah, he can see that. It’s only obvious now that he has spent a few weeks inside the system, but that’s propaganda for you. “The gamemakers set champions up to fail. Sponsors ply their favourites with supplies.” Healing potions, magical artifacts, they replace broken wands. Anything magic can fix is shuffled along old family ties.

“Yes. The gamemakers narrow down the field to an acceptable range of purebloods, and the sponsors elect from the remainder, voting with their money. It’s downright democratic, for our oligarchy,” Riddle says.

“Then why would you risk pissing them off? The few people who like Umbridge, they’ll be the people who put her in power – they must be sponsors, gamemakers, people in Grindelwald’s cabinet, maybe the Minister himself.”

“Getting them on side was never an option,” he says. “Bella is their darling.”

Harry takes in the sour tone and silently readjusts his understanding. He’d known that Riddle couldn’t be happy with Bellatrix usurping his position at the top of the pecking order, but it was impossible to know how much resentment he was hiding. But he isn’t hiding it from Harry now, and Merlin, Riddle is *pissed*. It must be galling to work for something for years and reach it on his own merits, only to have it handing to someone else by virtue of their family’s clout.

Harry leans over until he hits a warm shoulder. Riddle presses back. “Do you want to hear their script? I’d be Bellatrix’s attack dog, carving away all competitors on her orders. Then, she and I would have an epic duel in the finale, where she would prove her superior breeding. A poignant parallel to remind people of their place in our society.”

“But they must realise Bellatrix can’t beat you in a fair duel.”

“They might,” Riddle agrees. “In which case, I’d have an accident with a terrible beast halfway through the competition. I am not supposed to kill her. I will upset quite a few people if I do. Your Uncle Regulus, for one.”

Harry can see that. Regulus is more like a brother than a cousin to Andromeda, Narcissa and Bellatrix. He is much closer to them than Harry, at any rate. For Sirius, family is a choice, but to Regulus, blood

is duty.

“He’s not really my uncle,” falls out of Harry’s mouth inelegantly. They are something like third cousins twice removed, which is about as unrelated as Blacks get to other old families.

“Isn’t he your guardian?”

“Er,” technically, Sirius never gave up custody, though he is a wanted felon, and Remus now has most of the parental duties, but werewolves are ineligible for adoption, and Harry did spend a few months in an orphanage before Regulus cleaned up the paperwork. “It’s complicated.”

“I was surprised he didn’t come to see you off to the train.”

The conversation is getting a little *too* innocuous. “Regulus was at the Yule ball. We spoke there.”

“Yes, but I wager I spent more time with him that night than you did,” Riddle says.

Harry narrows his eyes. “Did you?”

“Naturally. He is the acting head of one of the most ancient and noble families.”

“Until Sirius is cleared.”

“That is what everyone says. They are so certain Sirius will be willing to take the mantle back after a taste of freedom.”

Harry thinks he has finally caught the thread of this inquisition, and he is about to redirect Riddle, unwilling to give any information about his godfather, but the conversation twists out from under him.

“But you would know him best, I suppose. Certainly, you must know Sirius better than you know his younger brother. You and Regulus cannot have the easiest of relationships, when he was suddenly obliged to care for you so soon after Sirius passed him over to name you heir.”

An understatement. That slight came stacked on top of baggage. It wasn’t the first time Sirius acted without thinking and left his mess for Regulus to clean up. Nor the first time he forced Regulus to compromise between loyalty and duty, mediate with furious relatives,

and get embroiled in the conflict between Bellatrix and Sirius he'd long sworn off of. But Harry isn't going to tell Riddle that either. "Not the easiest, no."

"And yet, Regulus would be just as cross with me if I killed you, as he would if I killed Bellatrix."

"Where did you get that idea?"

"He told me."

Harry eyebrows shoot to his airline. "In a crowded ballroom? Regulus discussed something *personal?*"

"Not in a ballroom, no." The smug, knowing note in his voice is infuriating. An invisible hand finds Harry's equally invisible shoulder and Riddle levers himself up. "Sweet dreams, Harry."

Harry wants to pull him back down, demand more, to know what Regulus and Riddle could possibly have to do with each other – except it feels like falling into a trap, and for that, he'd rather not wonder about it at all. He can't. He tries, but he knows he's too curious for his own good, and apparently Riddle knows it too. Harry lets his head fall onto the cold balustrade and sits there long after Tom is gone.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry this one was a few days late, but I'm honestly surprised I got it out at all. I've got real life deadlines and social obligations which are getting in the way, so I'm not sure I'll have the next couple updates out on time either. I really want to, though, because the shit I've been leading up to for the last dozen chapters is about to hit the fan.

Week 5 day seven to week 6 day seven

Chapter Summary

> Tom and Harry agreed with Hermione's terms to pull one more prank and then stop provoking Umbridge.
> Tom lasts about five days. Then, a week after they stole the blood quill, he celebrates the anniversary by escalating yet again.

The tornado goes off without a hitch, or so Harry assumes. He set a timed-release spell on the jar and got back to his dorm before the lid popped off.

He crosses from his window to his alarm clock just as it is starting to trill, pokes it sternly to shut it up, then gets ready as usual. It does not take long. There is no point showering before his workout, and he already brushed his teeth to get rid of the sleep taste. He'll stroll past the guard in the common room the same way he does every morning–

A thud rattles the door almost off its hinges. "Aurors! Open up!"

Harry jolts, and that's as far as he gets before three aurors barge in. He stumbles to his feet, one sock on, one sock off, and one shoe somewhere in between.

Two aurors branch out either side, casting a suite of detection spells. One summons his wand holster from the side table and immediately scans it, but Harry's eyes are fixed on the middle one – she has her wand aimed at his chest and she strides right into his personal space. He backs into the bed and has nowhere left to go.

"Where were you five minutes ago?" she demands.

Harry eyes his rumpled sheets and pyjamas strewn across the bed. His skin crawls.

Weak legilimency probes at his mind. She has nothing on Snape, but the shock leaves his mind exposed. She might've gotten the truth out of him, except he is more afraid of what could have happened – waking up to the bang, groggy with sleep, pinned down by sheets, blind without his glasses –

He struggles to swallow around a dry throat and glares with all the icy bravado he can muster. "Five minutes ago, you would've barged in on

me naked." Gold glints in the doorway as an omniocular swoops in. "Get that thing out of my bedroom."

"You don't give the orders here."

"The wand is clear," the first auror says.

"Bedroom is clear. Bathroom is clear," says the last.

The lady flicks her hand. "Move out."

They tromp up the stairs to the next room. As soon as their backs are turned, Harry grabs his sock, shoes, and holster, and hurries down to the common room.

Harry is just lacing up his shoes as Roger appears, rumpled and wide-eyed. It loosens some of the tension in his neck to no longer be alone. He can stop looking over his shoulder.

"The fuck was that for?" Roger says.

"Dunno," Harry lies. He glares at the guard, "They didn't say."

"Come on, let's get out of here," Roger mutters.

An auror blocks them at the portrait hole. "One at a time."

Harry grits his teeth and steps out, alone again.

…

The tornado does less wanton destruction than Harry expected. It doesn't pull portraits off the walls or blow the windows out. It is determined to catch people; it hoovers them up and they go round and round inside, bumping into each other and passing through the unlucky ghosts and getting thoroughly covered in vomit. The aurors try to stop it, bless their hearts. Peeves has a grand time tripping them into it. Once they lose their footing, their only hope is for a colleague to fish them out before the tornado catches them too.

In British tradition, life carries on despite the localised disaster. Word quickly spreads about the secret passages around the grand staircase. It is peaceful, in a way. Drafty, but peaceful. The tornado keeps Umbridge occupied until dinner, where it makes its final, fatal mistake gobbling up Trelawny. It is not clear whether Trelawny stumbled in on her own or if Umbridge dragged her, kicking and screaming, to force Dumbledore's hand.

Harry promised Hermione he'd be on his best behaviour after the tornado. Umbridge challenges his resolve immediately. Leaving off the pranks doesn't get her to back off, she just has more free time to enforce her rules and dream up new ones. She imposes her will on the champions more each day. There is now a list of restrictions limiting what champions are allowed to do afterhours, including such gems as 'no consumption of sugar or caffeine after 8PM' and 'mandatory ten minutes of quiet reflection for every hour of study'.

A new curfew from 10PM to 7AM is enforced by caterwauling charms on their doors so they can't even sit in the common room or the dormitory stairs. Harry can still get out the window, but there are regular random searchers of the dorms. So random, in fact, that Harry's room has been randomly selected three times already – once in the middle of the night. If Harry isn't in his room, when they expect him to be, there will be hell to pay. And Merlin forbid if he is caught in Hermione's room. She thought of enchanting their mirrors so they can talk, but the aurors would detect such powerful magic. She's already had to hide her invisibility ring outside the common room. The best they can do is protean charms on the bed posts, and scorch or cut words into it which can be quickly erased with a reparo. It has to be quick. The aurors could barge in at any moment. His room isn't safe anymore. He practices wandless magic on his bed with the curtains drawn, or in the bathroom, and hopes he'll have enough time to banish any evidence.

A few days later, Umbridge orders all the bed curtains removed. She smiles through the complaints saying it shouldn't concern them if they have nothing to hide.

The next morning Harry almost walks into an omniocular hovering right outside his door. He glares at it. He doesn't *think* they can see through walls, but he's not certain. He stomps down to the common room but stops a few steps short. There is a group of furious aurors at the base of the stairs, headed by Umbridge. She is near shaking the auror who had the night guard, which Harry would love to see because the auror looks distinctly confunded and would probably topple right onto her.

Aside from the murderous air, Umbridge is put together. She seems to compensate for the recent disorder in the castle with her personal composure. Not a hair out of place; perfectly pressed clothes; parchment on her clipboard all identical lengths and precisely situated. Even her steps seem measured for length and rhythm. Her clothes, of course, are an identical shade. Umbridge looks more purple

than pink, strangely enough, but then Harry realises he is looking at her through an eerie blue barrier. Harry blinks. Then his half-asleep brain kicks in and he speeds through the five stages of Good Grief: surprise, realisation, appreciation, delight, and finally –

Tom, I could kiss you.

"By all means," Riddle says from behind him. The sleep roughened voice sets Harry's hair on end. He doesn't look away from Umbridge – she's raving about something he hasn't listened to a word of – so he is taken entirely by surprise when Riddle touches him. It is a warm brand on the small of his back, out of sight, just for them. Then Riddle brushes past, closer than the narrow space strictly necessitates, and the warmth explodes all along Harry's side. "Stand around blocking the stairs all day."

"Detention, Mr Riddle!"

"Madam Umbridge, I know you are not entirely unreasonable. You must see I couldn't possibly keep a metre between us and still get past," Riddle protests mildly.

Harry heads for the portrait hole while Umbridge is distracted. He does not get far before an auror blocks his path. "Hand over your wand for inspection, Mr Potter."

He does with a roll of his eyes. It will take a few minutes, so he flops over the back of an armchair. The same omniocular that was outside his door follows loyally. He gets the feeling that isn't going to change, and he is scowling upside down at it when he catches sight of another blue shimmer. The girls' stairs are also blocked by an age line. Harry wishes he'd thought to do it days ago.

"Did the same thing happen to Beauxbatons and Durmstrang?" he asks the aurors.

"No," is the curt reply.

Harry is dying to know how Riddle pulled it off. He will have to ask Dobby if he fetched the potions from the Room, because the alternative is Riddle has a way of sneaking out that Harry doesn't know about, in addition to finding a way around the caterwauling charm and overcoming an armed auror, which is plenty scary already.

Riddle and Umbridge are still arguing. If he was trying to get out of detention, he'd be failing, but Harry doesn't think that is his goal.

Riddle is scrupulously polite and deferential, to the point of egging her on. Compared to him, Umbridge lacks not only all reason, but common sense and decency.

Tom might earn a second detention if he praises her dedication one more time. As it is, Harry is tempted to join him and do what he can to make detention easier. Riddle won their privacy back, at least until the lines are broken. These certainly won't last as long as the one blocking Umbridge's office, which is still working largely due to apathy – it was simpler to move detentions elsewhere because age lines are tedious to remove for anyone except the original caster. Still, for however many days it lasts, Harry might be able to sleep deeply again. Harry is tempted to go over there and plant one right on Riddle's mouth. Can't think of a better way to get detention, really.

Tom stumbles over his words. It is only a slight stutter, but that moment where he says nothing says *a lot*.

A slow grin stretches Harry's lips. He shouldn't. It's not nice.

But then, Riddle can stop snooping on Harry's thoughts any time.

Riddle is tall. Harry would need to get an arm around Tom's neck, drag him down to a more civilised height. It'd be a proper snog that'd leave no doubt as to whether they've earnt that detention. They could duck back into the stairwell and carry on a long as they please – Umbridge wouldn't be able to stop them.

Riddle glances over and the heat in his eyes pierces through Harry's ribs and lungs and catches his breath entirely. Riddle squirms and it is abruptly no longer funny. Merlin, Harry wants Riddle to join him on the chair, over or under him, either way it'd mean Harry wouldn't have to hang off him like a limpet, could free up his hands. Or if they were upstairs where they won't be interrupted –

"Mr Potter."

"Hmm?"

"Mr Potter, your wand."

Harry blinks at the auror. "Oh, right. Thanks."

He needs to leave. He is already late for the morning ordeal with Snape, and he isn't likely to consider being bailed up by aurors an acceptable excuse for tardiness.

If Harry entertains himself on the walk imagining how the fantasy plays out, well. Fantasies are fine, but it wouldn't do to neglect real life over things which cannot happen.

…

"Harry!"

Harry has been expecting the call since his omniocular got confused and wandered off in the last hallway. He stops and turns. Riddle is striding toward him. Harry's blood has barely settled since the common room, and now his heart kicks up again. He tries to calm it, restraining himself to a nod in greeting once Riddle is closer. Tom smiles and raises his hand in response.

A spell flashes from his fingertips and straight for Harry's chest.

It bounces off a shield and into a startled portrait.

It is over before Harry can blink. It takes a moment longer to consciously process. First: that is Harry's protego. Second: Riddle's spell was a harmless colour-changing charm. Third: Harry has his fists raised and his occlumency clamped down tight.

"What the fuck, Riddle?" Harry glares. He takes a step back. Riddle is so close he could just about step through the shield. The next spell should've hit by now, but Riddle folds his hands behind his back. Harry eyes them warily. Riddle's wand is in his holster, not his back pocket, but his muscles are flexed, like he is bracing to grab something.

"Couldn't tie you own shoes wandlessly, was it?"

"You sneaky bastard," Harry realises. Something curls in his gut; hot and broiling, a close cousin to anger, but Harry can't quite cross that line because Riddle is so *fucking* clever and ruthless.

"No more so than you." Riddle's grin puts his teeth on full display. "My, my, what you've been hiding – a reflex to shield. You're not just figuring out wandless spells, you're drilling to duel with them."

Fuck.

"And what reflexes they are. A shield charm at six feet. That's a reaction time of under twelve milliseconds. Oh, you would put up a *fight*," Riddle says with hungry eyes. His arms twitch but he holds

them back.

“I’m not going to fight you,” Harry repeats. No matter how much he wants to.

“You will. In the arena. When you can’t hold back. As soon as we’re in, I’m coming for you, Harry.”

Harry’s teeth bear on their own accord. “Oh, yeah?” If only it wouldn’t end with one of them dead, Merlin, Harry would drag him to the arena right now. He wants it more than anything. There is a chained beast in Harry that wants to be let loose to pit itself against Riddle. And sooner rather than later, because despite the open corridor behind him, Harry feels distinctly cornered. Riddle learnt from Harry’s duel with Bellatrix, from the failed bribes and intimidation attempts and seductions, and found the perfect strategy to uncover Harry’s secret abilities: Riddle gave him no time to think. The attack was so fast, Harry had no time to decide to let it hit him. There is nothing Harry could do about it, and he has no idea how to counter if Riddle does it again. He might find a way to startle Harry into his animagus form.

Harry bites his tongue, forces himself to calm. Rising to the challenge will show more confidence; itself giving away more information on Harry’s prowess. “I think I preferred it when you were trying to pry the secret out of my mind.”

There is a brief weight on Harry’s occlumency. It doesn’t find any obvious weaknesses and retreats until only an idle sliver remains attached, as if to a lodestone. “Quite impractical now,” Riddle says. “That’s alright. I like a challenge.”

With that, Riddle continues on his way, turning his back. Harry wants to tackle him but remains rooted to the spot. Snape will have to wait. Harry needs to get a few rounds in with McLaggen before he snaps.

…

Umbridge’s plans for Tom’s detention do not come to fruition once she realises her blood quill is gone. She turns the castle upside down looking for it. There is a hundred galleon reward for what is only described as a black quill and gift from Minister Grindelwald.

Her prime suspect is obvious. Harry’s rooms are searched twice. They slice open his mattress and pull up the floorboards. They flick through his books for things hidden between the pages. The go over every inch

of the room with detection spells.

The search spills out into the rest of the castle, and it seems the highly inquisitive behaviour is not the kind of distraction for Umbridge which Riddle prefers, as he returns the quill at the end of the week.

Riddle, once again, does not keep to Hermione's zero provocation policy.

Umbridge orders lobster bisque from the elves, but instead of her dinner, a tiny coffin pops onto her plate. She doesn't open it, fully prepared to sacrifice one of the aurors should it prove necessary. Detection spells don't find anything, but that doesn't mean it's safe. The auror casts *aberto* from halfway across the room.

The lid flies off and black smoke billows out, rising to the ceiling to form a laughing skull and snake.

"Ma'am, there is a quill inside, and a note."

"Let me see! Agh!" Half the feather crumbles when she picks it up. Umbridge scans the note and her face turns red, clashing horrible with her robes. "*Incendio*."

It burns, alright. White hot. The heat casts the parchment into the air, and the embers turn into fiery letters.

TORTURE US AGAIN AND WE WILL DESTROY YOU

The afterimage remains long after Harry tries to blink it away. He raises his glasses to rub his eyes, and when they settle back on his nose, Umbridge is pointing at him.

"You did this! My lovely blood quill! Right after I made you write lines, this happens!"

McGonagall startles and clutches her chest. "Lines? With *that*?"

"Aurors, seize him," Umbridge demands. "Bring him to my office."

"Hold on, you can't just –"

"I didn't destroy your damn quill!"

"Dolores, a motive is not proof –"

But large hands grab Harry and drag him to the doors. Just before an

auror shoves his head forward, he sees Hermione run over to Tom.

…

They don't go to her office. Umbridge had forgotten Harry can't get past the threshold, and he gathers his presence will be somewhat important for the proceedings. They end up in the runes classroom down the hall, with Umbridge doubly incensed for the hassle. She settles behind the teacher's desk and proceeds to draft a missive with a flamingo feather quill. She ignores the ruckus as two aurors put a small chair in front of the desk, then push Harry into it and hold him there.

"Stop with the manhandling. I'm not fucking fighting you." Not yet. He might still talk his way out of this. He'd better. A locked wand, no allies, eleven aurors, omnioculars, closed door and windows.

The door creeks open, though Harry could've sworn the hinges moved smoothly before.

"Severus," Umbridge says after a brief glance. "This does not concern you."

Harry cranes his head over his shoulder. His heart is racing and it does not calm at the sight of the potions master.

"If only that were true. No one is more disappointed than me, I assure you. Unfortunately," Snape says, sweeping into the room to hover like a black cloud over Harry, "after you had Mr Potter dragged from the hall so soon after your… announcement, several people rather incessantly reminded me I have a duty of care."

"Hmm," she says and scribbles another line. She signs the bottom with a flourish and holds it up. "Read this aloud, Mr Potter."

"The High Inqu–"

"All of it, Mr Potter. My instructions were quite simple."

He sighs. "Training Decree 12. The High Inquisitor is henceforth authorised to interrogate champions about suspected illicit activities."

"Do you have any questions?"

"Yeah, what's your poison? Truth serum or cruciatus?" He tries to relax, unconcerned, into the chair. He doesn't succeed. He recognised

Bellatrix in Umbridge's eyes and smile long before she tortured him with a quill.

"I use the methods which get results."

All of the above and more, then, until he says what she wants to hear.

Umbridge gestures and a petite auror crouches in front of him. It is the woman who checked his room; the legilimens.

Harry has a split second to decide how to play it, and in that moment, he becomes an open book. He throws up some walls for her to knock down, because she'll be expecting some resistance, as he leads her in merry circles. It couldn't be easier – she's not half the legilimens Snape is, and Harry knows what she's looking for. He shows her the detention, writing line after line, in vivid detail. She tries to find associated memories but, nope, nothing to see here – just regular quills. He cut his finger on a metal nib once. He keeps bringing her back to the detention and each time she flinches in pain. She tries for memories of Umbridge's office instead. Harry has plenty to choose from; hours upon hours staring at the walls.

Eventually, she retreats.

"Well?" Umbridge demands.

"I didn't see him steal or destroy your property," the auror says. As Umbridge's knuckles turn white, she hurries to add, "His occlumency is not strong enough to resist veritaserum."

"Well, then," Umbridge pushes a floral teacup over to Harry. "Drink it. All of it."

Harry considers throwing the scolding liquid in her face. The next cup would be poured down his throat, jaw pried open.

Harry eyes the hand on his shoulders. They don't let up. In that case, "You're gonna have to push it closer."

She does. "Sugar?"

"No thanks." Any more sugar and he'll have to add more veritaserum so he can drink it. At least it is chamomile. Caffeine hasn't agreed with him since he became an animagus. He takes his time, grimacing at the taste, and locking his mind down under shields. He can feel the potion trying to settle him into a daze. He lets his face go slack.

“What is your name?”

Harry James Potter. “Harry Potter.” He almost stutters over his middle name, but he keeps it in his head. That’s promising.

“What is your greatest weakness?”

I love Tom Riddle. “I –” Harry opens his mouth to say anything but that, when his tongue is abruptly glued to the roof of his mouth. He gives a strangled cough.

“Severus Snape!”

“I am contractually obligated to prepare this boy to be a victor. If I allow the idiot to divulge his innumerable weaknesses, I would be shirking my responsibilities.” Snape stows his wand up his sleeve, looking put out and bored. He meets Umbridge’s furious eyes, the might of the Ministry behind her, without flinching. “The question is unacceptable. It is unrelated to an interrogation purported to uncover illicit activities.”

Umbridge tsks. “We must verify that the potion is working. It is standard procedure.” Harry finds himself staring down her wand. “*Finite incantatem*.”

Harry wants to laugh at her, but he’d just choke on his tongue again.

Umbridge smiles. It does not reach her cold eyes. “Remove the spell, Severus, or *you* will be removed. Permanently.”

Snape is silent and Harry realises with sudden clarity that he is not going to give in. Snape will accept the consequences because the spell will hold. The counter won’t be found in any book. Snape invented it, and he only shared the counter with Harry, Hermione and McGonagall.

Harry meets Snape’s dark eyes and tries to look confident.

Snape glares for a long moment. Harry doesn’t know if Snape got the message. He doesn’t know if Snape will trust him. Snape draws his wand and flicks it.

Harry works the crick out of this jaw.

“Now, Mr Potter, tell me your greatest weakness.”

It isn’t a question. The potion still tries to pour the truth out,

regardless, but Harry can twist it. Weakness – fear – soul sucking demons that Harry only survived because Remus was there – "I was helpless when I faced dementors."

Umbridge smiles. "Now, was that so hard? Did you steal a blood quill from my office?"

"No," *it was not so hard to twist the answer to dementors.*

"Did you get someone else to steal it for you?"

"No."

"Did you write the note?"

"I've never written you a note."

"When was the last time you touched this quill?"

"Saturday last week." It was Saturday when he wrote lines, and it was still Saturday when he stole it.

"Do you know the person who stole and destroyed it?"

There is no one person who fits that question. *There is* "No" *answer.*

"Who do you *think* could be responsible?"

He tries to say something absurd about poltergeists or Bellatrix, but his mouth won't open. "The aurors are the only ones who have access to your office." And their shoddy work let Hermione and Tom disable the wards right under their noses. Harry could consider them accessories to the crime.

Umbridge is going to chip a tooth if she grinds her teeth any harder. "I know you're responsible for the trouble around here!"

Harry blinks placidly.

"Where do you go and what do you do when you are avoiding the omnioculars?"

"I use the secret passages to get between classes. They are faster than the main routes. I don't avoid the omnioculars on purpose, they just can't get past the tapestries and doors by themselves."

"Have you broken any decrees?"

He has to give her something or she'll know he can lie. "Yes."

Her eyes light up and she readies the flamingo quill. "Enumerate them."

The serum helpfully prompts a very long list to the tip of his tongue. Just for fun, he tallies up how many he's broken in the last 24 hours. He flew around the grounds last night, read a research article on vampires which had the audacity to also be written by a member of the species, met Hermione unchaperoned, hugged her, said he wouldn't piss on Umbridge if she was on fire which probably crosses the line into seditious criticism, and he is currently refusing to snitch on his co-conspirators and himself. That's only six out of twelve decrees but fifty percent is a passing grade and what was he talking about? Oh, yeah.

"I was with Hermione and Krum without a chaperone, for which I served detention. I have broken the dress code – I took my shoes off in the common room once and I've undone my top shirt button walking between classes. I think I've broken the distance decree since you increased it to three feet. I'm not sure how often or with who, but it is a long way in a crowded classroom."

Umbridge narrows her eyes. "What about your illegal duel with Miss Black?"

"Duelling in the designated spaces is not a violation of a decree and I didn't cast any forbidden spells."

"Are you working with Dumbledore or involved in a rebellious organisation?" Even now, the Ministry don't want to name it, to admit the Order of the Pheonix exists.

"No." The magic doesn't even urge Harry to speak about the Order, but he was not expecting it to be so difficult to keep his mouth shut about the Defence Association. Maybe he shouldn't be surprised; from what he's heard from Sirius and Ron, the DA are raising Cain at Beauxbatons.

"What other rules have you broken?"

Oh, now that's a long trip down memory lane. "In first year, I –"

There is a knock on the door. "Come in," Umbridge calls.

Harry doesn't stop rambling. He has managed to get Umbridge's eye to

twitch and he doesn't want to lose momentum, "–Filch caught me out after curfew because Malfoy challenged me to a duel–"

"There is an urgent situation," the auror says.

"–then I flew on a broomstick without supervision–"

"Yes? Tell me," Umbridge demands. "Oh, be quiet, Potter."

"He cannot stop until he has finished answering the question," Snape says.

"–I knocked the defence professor out of the stands during a Quidditch match. It was an accident, but it still counts as battery, although it turned out he was possessed by a demon, so I didn't even get detention–"

"*Silencio*," Umbridge says and sighs with relief which does not last long.

"There's been another incident," the auror says.

Umbridge whirls on Harry. "You! You're trying to get out of this!"

Harry tells her she is a fucking idiot, but that he is flattered she thinks he could pull it off alone, under her nose, with no prior warning.

"*Finite!*"

"–and in second year I wandered into the girls loo by mistake–"

"Enough! What do you know about this new prank?"

"Nothing," Harry says, and it is the honest truth. What he suspects about it is another matter entirely.

…

Umbridge drags Harry, and anyone else in her office, after the auror. The group approach Ravenclaw tower and the professors' apartments, where the staff and officials are staying. As soon as the auror mentions a swamp, Harry knows what happened. Mostly. He's not sure if he should thank Hermione, Riddle, Dobby or all three.

The swamp is glorious. The entire corridor is transformed. The *smell* alone…

Umbridge pinches her nose, dropping Harry's arm in the process. She seems to forget he's there. Harry rubs the claw marks out as she strides forward demanding answers. The word has clearly spread; most of the staff are already here, and a fair few of the champions.

Hermione spots him and abandons Cedric mid conversation. Cedric takes a step in their direction, but Snape's glare stops him in his tracks.

"Harry! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Harry is compelled to answer.

"No questions," Snape snaps.

"I'm on veritaserum," Harry explains quietly. There are many people he does not want to run into while dosed with truth serum, especially if they *know* he's been dosed. And chief among them has just rounded the corner beside Barty Crouch, trailed by an omniocular (or an alibi, as the case may be). "Oh, that's not good."

Riddle is far smarter than Umbridge and better at closing loopholes, and if he was born with any reservations about taking advantage of circumstances he misplaced them sometime in his early adolescence.

Snape's glare has even less of an effect on Riddle than it did on Hermione.

"Look at me," Snape demands. He pries Harry's eyelids back, checking his pupils. "Good lord, how much did she give you?"

"Dunno. Does a higher dose make it stronger?"

"It makes it last longer." Snape pulls out a small purple vial. "Three drops."

Harry swallows and shudders when the taste lingers. It is worse than the tea.

It is Harry's turn to experience the glare. "Go back to your dorm and stay there," Snape says. While Umbridge is busy, Harry assumes he means. "Take your friends." Translation: grab anyone who could contradict his story and get them on the same page.

Harry nods and waves Cedric over. He doesn't know enough to get Harry in serious trouble, but he'll be on Umbridge's hit list for being a

friend, so he feels he ought to warn him too.

Cedric reaches them at the same time as Riddle and his mentor. Crouch stares at Harry with strange intensity. Harry wonders if they've met before. He has a youthful face, and there's something in the way he moves which makes Harry wonder if he is just out of Hogwarts, but that's impossible – Crouch was in seventh year when he won two editions ago, which makes him over fourteen years older than Harry. He could've recognised James, though, since he and Lily mentored Crouch's Game, and this swamp is exactly the sort of thing his dad would've done.

"It is like the castle itself is trying to tell her she's not welcome here," Riddle says, examining the swamp with apparent surprise.

Cedric looks alarmed and checks for eavesdroppers. He is probably right to be. Umbridge will take her mood out on anyone. She is having a very bad day. As she stands with her wand between her hands, appearance hurriedly smoothed down after the rushed walk up here, Harry wonders if her composure or her wand will snap first.

Harry gives them the quick-notes version: interrogation with legilimency then veritaserum on topics that ranged from personal weaknesses to every rule he'd ever broken. One out of five stars. Do not recommend.

Hermione and Riddle probably infer, given none of them are strung up by the ankles, that he got away without incriminating them. He'll catch them later to give specific tips so they can do the same when their turn inevitably comes, but he cannot even mention the possibility to Cedric in case he unwillingly tells Umbridge she failed. So for now they watch the show.

After a few timid attempts to get rid of the swamp don't make it multiply or explode or do much worse than belch some gas at them, the officials tried to remove it in earnest. Some of the officials, that is. The most qualified people must sadly decline to solve the problem. They'd hate to accidentally prolong it, as happened with the fireworks. Could be in breach of a decree, you see.

Barty Crouch doesn't volunteer to help, remaining a faithful half step behind Riddle, though other Supremacists victors do, like Lestrange and Karkaroff, but their strengths tend to lie in battle magic. It is a similar situation for the aurors – they do not face many problems they cannot hex. As for the Ministry officials, it is yet another cautionary

tale for hiring based on family connections rather than ability.

Several people hovering nervously in the background suggest it would be safer to leave it until the magic erodes and it vanishes naturally. But the swamp is not like the fireworks – it is very stable. It could last indefinitely unless dispelled. McGonagall says nothing to warn them of this. Harry could've sworn he saw her admiring the transfiguration and murmuring, "That's my boys."

Newt Scamander crouches down to turn over leaves and sift through the mud. "This is a complete ecosystem," he tells McGonagall, around where Moody is checking the gas for poisons. "Do you suppose this is transportive or replicative transfiguration?"

"Oh, enough of this," Snape says. He approaches the swamp with purpose. Harry's heart sinks because the prank won't stand against a wizard of his calibre for long. But Snape is not having any of this nonsense. He conjures a bridge without breaking stride.

"It is about time you made yourself useful. Wait, Severus? Severus! Where are you going!" Umbridge demands.

"To bed," he replies, not deigning to look her way. "Keeping the boy alive puts great demands on my time, effort and attention, which means I need sleep if I am not to strangle him," he declares, but still does not turn, merely raising his wand in a salute. Or – not a salute, a vanishment. An intrepid auror who'd climbed onto the bridge for a closer look lands knee-deep in muck.

And the winner of the Not My Fucking Job award goes to a dramatic git, Harry thinks, and for the first time it is tinged with amusement.

Umbridge gapes at the corridor where Snape disappeared as if she wants to go after him, bend him to her will, but what is she going to do – give him detention for doing the bare minimum required by his contract? Sign him up for a Ministry Approved Workplace Behaviour seminar a second time? Well, yes, she probably will do that.

A quiet murmur propagates through the crowd. Madam Maxime looks after Snape. A moment later, the huge woman cocoons herself in a transparent barrier and walks through the swamp. "I could not possibly interfere in Ministry business. I have been informed quite clearly that it is not my place."

Several more trainers and mentors mutter vague excuses and take their leave. Some, like McGonagall now that Harry knows how to spot

it, are vindictively amused. Most are tired and simply do not care.

Umbridge whirls on Dumbledore again. Her hair is beginning to frizz in the humidity. It's got nothing on Hermione's, but she is looking a bit manic. "Are you not in control of this school? With all that you've let happen here, I'd suspect you of deliberately sabotaging the Games and the Ministry itself. I order you to fix this!"

But the headmaster develops a sudden hearing ailment and must check in with Poppy in case he was struck by anything in the tornado. He leans on McGonagall and they hobble to the hospital wing.

"Filius! You are supposed to be a charms master. You must restore this hallway."

"I'm not sure I understand you when you use such big words," Flitwick says, and judging by Umbridge's expression, he is paraphrasing or quoting her. Harry is not surprised; she has belittled him in every way short of offering a colouring book and crayons. "Oh, my, look at the time!" Flitwick then floats over the swamp, lands with a skip, and heads off.

Umbridge looks wildly around for her next target, but they are scattering like ashes.

"She is rattled," Tom murmurs, sounding eminently satisfied. "Not by the swamp as much as by the people. They're not listening to her, or they can't do what she wants, and there's nothing she can do about it."

"She is going to have a nervous breakdown," Hermione says, biting her nails.

"Probably. People who cannot control their own emotions instead try to control other peoples' behaviour to avoid things that upset them. The more she tries to control, the less she will manage to have a meaningful impact on simply by virtue of spreading her influence too thin, and the more anxious she will become."

"Fine then," Umbridge pats down her robes to find her wand. She draws it from a deep inside pocket and straightens, taking a deep breath. "*Evanesco!*"

Which is when the fake in her hand turns into pitchfork, and she topples over from the sudden weight of it to land face first with a splash.

Harry claps his hands over his mouth but it's too late to stop the startled laugh ringing through the corridor. Crouch and a few others are similarly afflicted, but Hermione and Cedric look on in fascinated horror.

"Time to go," Harry decides. Before the toad can hop out and kill him.

"Did she just muck up an OWL level vanishing spell?" Cedric wonders.

"Looks like it," Riddle says with a smile.

Week 7 day one to five

Chapter Summary

> Dumbledore wants a word, Snape gives him a piece of his mind, and Harry figures out why Tom entered the Games

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry knew Umbridge had pissed off a lot of people, he just hadn't realised how many. The swamp inconveniences the mentors and the Ministry officials, and Harry is fairly sure McGonagall alone could remove it in minutes, so the fact it's still standing days later says a lot. It turns out, adults who have gone through hell and survived do not well tolerate being patronised.

There is no excusing the swamp as an accident. It is abundantly clear to the Ministry now that there is dissent in Hogwarts, and while Umbridge tries to get on top of it, the Ministry projects a strong image that there is nothing of any significance going on. No one is allowed to laugh about the pranks. They are not even allowed to allude to them.

Umbridge takes a crack at Hermione and Riddle the next day. She questions each of them for over an hour, but Harry isn't too concerned. Their occlumency is better than his, and with a few tips from Tom on how to temporarily blank out memories, Hermione isn't limited to telling the truth from a certain point of view. Snape himself tested her until her attempts to imitate veritaserum exposure "weren't an embarrassment to the entire concept of acting". Unlike Harry, apparently, who didn't seem confounded enough and then forgot to act entirely once they started walking to the swamp. He raised enough red flags that the aurors are questioning his testimony, and they're bound to notice what they didn't in the moment; he gave away he could give incomplete answers when he told them his name.

The other champions don't fare as well. As soon as Görder recovers from the potion daze, she bursts into tears. It takes Amelia an hour to calm her down. Trelawny gets a full day of detention for saying she thinks Umbridge's time is limited. Roger coughs up blackmail material on his grandmother who is behind some spicier opinion pieces in the Prophet. Delacour leaves the room spitting mad and looking more

than a little bird-like. She has some natural resistance to mind manipulation – enough to avoid outright stating that her mentor is half giant – but Umbridge gets an ominous pep in her step afterwards and writes a decree giving herself the power to dismiss unfit mentors.

The decree could be in part motivated by Snape. Umbridge is also interrogating mentors, and she is probably smart enough to look at a master potioneer and occlumens, and realise she needs some other leverage. But the first one to fall to the decree is Madam Maxime, banished from the castle to live on the grounds under a scandal of half giant heritage.

Delacour enters the healing room in a fury. “This is your fault!” she shouts at Harry. She gets a swing in before the startled healers cast a barrier between then and force a calming draught on her. Delacour quietens but does not stop glaring. Harry says nothing. She is sort of right. He helped piss Umbridge off and now she is targeting his allies. Cedric said she spent most of her interrogation of him asking for dirt on Harry.

Delacour chooses to sit alone at lunch, and at dinner, Trelawny looks nervously between Harry and Umbridge. “She will use your weakness against you,” she predicts before going to eat with Fleur.

Harry doesn’t know if they’ll come back. And Harry hasn’t seen Ivankova for a few days. He didn’t notice at first that she was more absent than usual, which in hindsight is a sign she’s been distancing herself for a while.

He wonders if this is part of Riddle’s plan – to incense Umbridge to the point anyone would be crazy to ally with Harry. Harry would have no backup in the arena, no chance in a group fight, no leverage. He’d be at Riddle’s mercy. Ginny’s old boyfriend tried to pull something similar, isolating Ginny from her friends and family. He was an insecure prick on a mission to become the most important person in her life. It doesn’t seem to fit Riddle, and Harry would dismiss the idea, except Riddle is also trying to spend more time together – trying and failing.

Umbridge has had enough of the vanishing act they pull between classes. Harry suspects she only waited this long because she wanted to catch them breaking the rules so she could punish them. A few words and their freedom is all but stripped away. Aurors will escort them to and from their dorms. If they take a bathroom break longer than five minutes, or otherwise duck out of sight, they will be

assumed to be causing trouble and punished accordingly.

Riddle, who only follows rules to the letter and spirit if they happen to align with his plans, figures the aurors fill the chaperone requirement so he and Harry brazenly continue to meet up between classes. They must censor themselves for their audience, which is irritating but workable, until Umbridge unilaterally puts a stop to that too.

Which is when Tom goes from antagonistic to downright combative.

Umbridge wakes one morning locked in a broom closet by an age line which will not let even the most geriatric of wizards past. Any food the house elves deliver turns to smoking skulls and snakes. The aurors dismantle a wall in an attempt to get her out, which is when they realise the age line is a circle. She will not starve, unfortunately. It only took the aurors a week to break the age lines on the dorms. Tom replaced those barriers by sunset the same day.

But Harry has been counting – those were their last vials of the potion. The new lines will not last another week, now the aurors know what they need to do to be rid of them. Riddle's estimate is four days at most.

It is worth it to have a safe space. It must be, because the retribution is bound to sting. If Riddle gets any less sleep, he might actually kill someone. He is carrying evidence of late nights and hard work under his eyes. Harry would think the magnitude of the tournament has finally hit him, but he is still skipping important classes. He disappears into the castle at the crack of dawn, stays out until curfew, and half the time goes to bed laden with books. It's taking a toll. He is irritable, his charm has a noticeable edge to it, and his patience for people getting in his way is non-existent. The first time Bellatrix whines at him to go to transfiguration with her, he flatly refuses. At the second entreaty, she gets a point-blank stinging hex.

Bellatrix did not retaliate, even though she could. Umbridge granted her favourite champions the right to unlock their wand holsters outside the training rooms, ostensibly so they can protect themselves from dangerous pranks. She did not even draw on Riddle. Bellatrix is not a witch to pass up an advantage, which means she doesn't have it. Whatever power he holds over Slytherins, it grips her even when she is armed and he is not. It seems like a clue, but the rest of the pieces just will not come together in Harry's mind.

Soon after Umbridge gives the Supremacists their wands, she

threatens to take everyone else's away. Decree 14 is pasted in bold print above the others: The High Inquisitor may confiscate wands from champions for misbehaviour.

"What qualifies as misbehaviour?" Cedric asks.

Roger throws his hands up. "Killing someone? Backchat? An untucked shirt? Could be anything." Umbridge bandies the term about liberally.

Considering Harry dodged a curse from Bellatrix on the way down, and his auror guard was good for nothing but a meat shield, the decree is not targeting a specific behaviour – rather, specific people.

"I'm more concerned that it doesn't say how long she can keep them. Or if she'll give them back. What if she sends us into the arena without our wands?" Roger continues.

"She can't do that! Right?" Cedric protests.

"She'll do what she wants. And what she wants is to kill us," Roger glares daggers at Harry.

"I didn't set the age lines or destroy her quill or make a swamp or whatever else she's picked this week."

"Sure," Roger says. He doesn't sound like he believes it. "But you know something."

Harry doesn't look at the Supremacists, where Riddle is sitting. He rolls his eyes. "If I knew who it was, don't you think I'd tell Umbridge to get her off my case?"

It's rhetorical, but Roger answers definitively. "No. You're as bad as a bloody Hufflepuff."

"Hey!"

"Sorry, Ced. But you know Hufflepuffs are loyal past the point of common sense, let alone self-preservation."

"It can pay off to stick together. We're stronger united," Cedric says.

"Yeah," Harry agrees. "That's why they're trying to divide us." He looks between Umbridge and Riddle. He isn't sure if it's true for one or both of them, but it is certainly true.

…

“Mr Potter,” Dumbledore says. To Harry’s alarm, he stops and greets the aurors.

“Snape,” an auror replies with a barely civil nod.

Harry closes his mouth before he can stick his foot in it. He is not sure where he developed such a healthy reflex.

“Come along,” definitely-not-Snape says.

Harry thinks carefully before he risks opening his gob again. “What are we doing today?”

“Illusion magic. Minerva tells me you need more practice,” Dumbledore winks.

When they arrive at the training room Snape and McGonagall usually use, Dumbledore reaches for the handle with one hand and into his robes with the other. The magic which follows happens so quickly, it is seamless. Harry and Dumbledore go to the back of the room, while Harry and Snape and the aurors remain at the front.

Harry raises an eyebrow.

“They cannot see or hear us,” Dumbledore says.

Harry watches himself receive an irate lecture as if he is in a pensieve. “Well, that’s a little unnerving.”

Fake Harry creates a ghostly troll and Snape scolds him when it flickers. McGonagall would weep to see the attention to detail, but it’s not foolproof. If the aurors try to touch the illusions, they’ll be briefly surprised and then extremely angry.

Dumbledore clears his throat, and Harry reluctantly looks away from the spectacle.

“Your fortitude astounds me, Harry.”

“Huh?”

“I have never seen someone go through what you have and remain so compassionate.”

Harry snorts. “You’re the one person who seems to think that’s a good thing.”

“It is not the easiest or safest road,” Dumbledore agrees. “Especially to travel alone. The pressure you are under to harden your heart – but you never compromise on your principles. Your parents would be very proud.”

“You think so?” Harry says. He picks at the initials carved into a chair for something to do with his hands. “It’s just, Sirius wants me to do anything I have to, to make it home.”

“No one could say you are not doing you upmost,” Dumbledore assures him. “Your parents would understand. They were upstanding people. Your father was fiercely protective of his friends, and your mother was a voice for the less fortunate. You are the best of both of them.”

“Thank you,” Harry ducks his head. “Did you know them well?”

Dumbledore nods. “I almost mentored Lily, but Professor Flitwick threatened to resign if I poached his favourite student. We got much closer after the arena, for the remained of their fifth year and through their sixth and seventh year. I do what I can to support students who survive such an ordeal. Children are resilient, but I find it helps immeasurably for them to have a willing listener who can relate. We spoke often before your parents graduated and kept in contact.”

Harry hums agreeably, but inside his heart kicks up a gear. He wants answers. Dumbledore knows Harry can’t be interrogated. If he is calm and mature, maybe Dumbledore will trust him to keep a secret. “My parents were involved in the Order of the Phoenix, weren’t they?”

Dumbledore evaluates him over the top of his spectacles. Eventually, he says, “Yes. Shortly before they were killed.”

Harry hesitates. The mystery has haunted him for years. Answers could be worse, but he has to know now because there might not be a later. In a small voice he asks, “Why did they die?”

“They wanted a better future,” Dumbledore says. “But the people in power prefer things to remain the same.”

“They were assassinated.”

“Yes.”

Harry closes his eyes. He’d long suspected, but confirmation hits hard. Two bright lives cut short, dozens of others shattered by the loss, so

politicians like Umbridge could hold onto power for another day.

“The Ministry wanted to send a message to anyone who thought like them – those who wanted a world where their children could grow without the Games casting a shadow over their childhood.”

If only. Harry swipes at his burning eyes. “Is that what the Order stands for, then?”

“It is. A kinder world, which can only be achieved without a Dark Lord running the government.”

The Dark Lord that killed his parents. Harry clenches his teeth until his jaw clicks. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Dumbledore smiles. “You are doing plenty.”

“I can fight,” Harry protests. “I’m better than I pretend to be, I promise, I can help!”

“Not from in here,” Dumbledore says gently. “There is no way past the wards.”

“There must be. If a portkey was linked into them – and you’re the headmaster.”

“But I am not the master of the wards; Grindelwald is,” he holds up a forestalling hand. “And he is aware of the possibility of champions trying to escape. There are no portkeys to steal, not even on his most loyal followers.”

“But you have a secret army?” Harry asks.

“Of a sort.”

An army Harry can’t join yet. Why bring it up, why risk exposure when there is a chance Harry will not even survive? Harry raises his head slowly. “There’s something else. Something I *can* do.”

Dumbledore leans forward. His beard dips almost to his knees. “Yes, and you are already doing it. The public adore you, even as the gamemakers frame you as a villain.”

That is not what Harry expected. Oh, he knows about his reputation – Sirius is delighted the world thinks his godson is a maverick – but, “So what?”

“An army would fail without public support. It is not possible to take the Ministry by siege. The Ministry will fall to nothing short of a public revolution.”

“Grindelwald isn’t popular,” Harry points out. Not like he was in his youth. A heavy weight bows his shoulders. “He hasn’t been for a decade, and people haven’t risen up before. Why would they now?”

“People were too afraid to speak out. The Ministry has ears everywhere – they will hear any dissent and quash it. The Ministry is hyper-competent and ruthless, and cannot be unsettled by the efforts of one measly person. It is an untouchable monolith – or that is the illusion.” Dumbledore gestures broadly. Fake Harry and Snape have moved onto boring shield charm drills, and the aurors are captivated.

Harry catches on quickly. “An illusion can control people, but only until they see through it.”

“The myth of the Ministry keeps the masses compliant out of fear,” Dumbledore says. His eyes twinkle over the top of his glasses. “Harry, how do we defeat the manifestation of human fear?”

A boggart. “Laughter.” Harry sucks in a breath. “The pranks.”

“The pranks,” Dumbledore agrees, “which have shown one of the highest-ranking Ministry officials to be utterly impotent in her rage.”

Harry’s chest swells with a rush of vicious satisfaction, but stops short. Everyone is giving him too much credit. Hermione started it, with products the twins invented, and the torch is now almost entirely carried by Riddle’s spite. But Tom probably wouldn’t want Dumbledore knowing he is involved.

Harry is considering what to say when Dumbledore straightens. “Oh, dear,” he says, and he waves his hand just in time for the door to slam open.

“Albus,” the real Snape says dangerously. The aurors don’t react and Snape doesn’t acknowledge them, or the illusion. His eyes flick to the real Harry and narrow.

“Really, Severus, this is delicate magic,” Dumbledore says, looking a bit strained around the eyes.

Snape ignores him. Harry shrinks back at the fury in every line of his body as he stalks forward. He wracks his brains for anything he has

done recently which Snape might've found out about, to get a head start on compiling excuses.

"What did he just tell you?" Snape demands.

"I didn't do– what?"

Snape looms over him. "Answer me Potter, or so help me."

Harry's mouth flaps soundlessly, still reeling, until an answer falls out. "The Ministry killed my parents."

Snape whirls on Dumbledore. "How *dare* you."

"He has a right to know."

"That's not why you told him!" Harry's eyes widen. No one yells at Dumbledore. "He is *my* responsibility. He is not yours to martyr."

"Now, Severus, there is no need for anyone to be martyred."

"Oh, certainly, it might not be the ideal outcome for you, you might even regret if he dies, but it wouldn't hurt your plans." Snape's voice is pure acid. "What else did you tell him?"

"The Order –"

Snape growls.

"Harry is safe. Magic cannot get secrets out of him," Dumbledore tries, and fails, to placate.

"Including obliviation. How convenient for you."

Harry has his wand drawn in a flash. Snape glares at him, and when he turns the expression on Dumbledore the ferocity increases by an order of magnitude.

"He has proven he can protect the information," Dumbledore insists.

"Which protects *you*. Who is going to protect *him* when he does something *stupid*?"

"He is in no more danger now than this morning. The Ministry will not find out how much he knows."

"No, he will just act on it, which is what you goddamn intended! He is

already a nuisance to keep alive, I do not want to see how much worse he could be when he is actively trying to rile them up *for the greater good*," Snape echoes derisively, landing a hit where it hurts.

Harry doesn't appreciate being spoken around, but it pales in comparison to how much he does not want to get between them.

Dumbledore looks pained but still says, "The prophecy will come to pass regardless of what we try to do about it."

"Your *nerve*–" Snape is struck speechless. Harry has never seen him like this; Snape appears to be counting curses to hang onto the last fringes of his self-control.

"A prophecy?" Harry asks, before it occurs to him that he might live longer if he keeps his mouth shut.

"Get. Out." Snape whispers. A flick of his fingers sticks Harry's feet to the floor as he lunges for the exit to exercise his belated survival instincts.

Dumbledore stands and bows his head. He gestures to the illusion. "I can give you five minutes. Young Harry there will have a misfire and produce a blinding flash, the doppelgangers will vanish, and you can take their places."

"Out!"

Dumbledore leaves. Snape stares at the place he'd occupied, chest heaving like bellows.

Harry silently cancels the sticking charm with the barest twitch of his wand. Something tells him to hold as still as possible. This time, he bites his lip to stay silent.

He lasts two minutes. "What prophecy?"

"Forget about it," Snape says, harsher than usual, but Harry is relieved he didn't get his hand bitten off. "Forget you know the meaning of the word. Forget everything Dumbledore told you. Keep your head down, do not attract any more Ministry attention, and you might get out alive."

"But what about–" his parents, the Order, the future, the chance to ensure this is the last Games.

“What about them?” Snape bites back, but quickly switches to a line of reasoning less likely to abjectly fail. “You cannot help anyone if you do not take care of yourself first.”

Harry’s expression settles into something slightly less mulish.

Snape presses the advantage. “Your parents died because they got involved with the Order of the Phoenix. They were loudly drumming up support for Albus bloody Dumbledore and the Ministry perceived them as a threat.” A constipated look crosses his face. “Your parents did not intend to give their lives to the cause. They did not care about politics more than they cared about you. They would want you to live.”

Harry’s eyes narrow. “I know you’re trying to manipulate me.”

“Where was this savviness when Dumbledore succeeded, dangling tantalising information over your head?” Snape sneers. “I will have your word before you leave this room, Potter. Tell me you are not going to die for Albus Dumbledore’s agenda.”

“I won’t die for him.”

Snape narrows his eyes suspiciously. “You won’t die for anyone.”

Harry keeps his mouth shut. He’d jump in front of a spell if it was the only way to save Hermione.

“Think of your posse of Weasleys and your miserable godfather. They stood by you for years. You don’t owe Dumbledore; if anything, you owe it to them to survive–”

Harry has had enough. “I want to *live*.” He takes a deep breath, forces his fists to unclench. “Not just to the end. For decades to come. I’ll have to live with this.”

“But first you have to make it out,” Snape says, gnashing his teeth. “You are the last part of Lily alive. You are her legacy. You do not get to throw it away.”

“How do you remember my mother? She was kind and uncompromising on what she believed. Should I throw that away, instead? Should I become someone she wouldn’t recognise?”

“You cannot still be naïve enough to imagine you will get out of this unchanged.”

“My parents didn’t change.”

“Of course they did.”

“They were good people!”

“That doesn’t matter! No sane person could see what we’ve seen, do what we’ve done, and remain unchanged,” Snape says. “You will do things which replay endlessly in your nightmares. Then it will all be taken out of context and the bastardised version will be thrown in your face for the rest of your life. You have a line you cannot bear to cross – so did we all. You will cross it. You will draw a new line, and you will cross that too. If you don’t, you are not giving your all, and you will lose to someone who is. You are not talented enough to half-arse your way through this.”

“I know. And I’ll do those things. But I’ll do them as myself, not whoever the Ministry tries to turn me into.”

“You’ll do what you have to?” Snape asks suspiciously.

“Yes.”

“No more pranks.”

“If I –”

“You have to.”

“…Fine.”

…

Flying doesn’t clear Harry’s head. He needs to find Hermione, to unload everything Dumbledore said, but he doesn’t have the map and she’s not *always* in the library. Short one best friend, Harry sneaks into the Room of Requirement. He wants to forget for a moment where he is. He wants to go back to a simpler time. He wants to be free.

He steps through the doorway onto a pebble beach. Waves crash on the shore, wind tugs at this hair with a salt-sweet breeze. He can see Valetta and Sliema in the distance. He can’t see the Room’s walls and it looks like whole world is open.

Harry walks into the icy Mediterranean until his trousers are soaked to the knee. It’s a familiar chill. This was a good holiday. Lily was never a fan of water – or maybe it was an effect of her animagus being a

giant cat. Harry doesn't know. There are countless things he never thought to ask and might never find out. She'd lounged in the sun while Harry played in the waves with James and the Marauders. Pettigrew turned out to have a knack for glassblowing. Sirius liked the local food so much he signed up for cooking lessons. He locked Remus in the catacombs when Remus got so enthusiastic about the history that it cut into lunch time. Then James and Harry played hide and seek, but James accidentally-on-purpose forgot to tell Sirius they were playing. Sirius thought they'd lost Harry and turned into Padfoot to track him down before Lily could kill them. The timely arrival of the next tour group meant he had to stay a dog for hours. The others, with the true sympathy and solidarity of mates, were in hysterics. They left rumours of a Grim hanging around the crypts behind.

"Where are we?" Riddle asks.

Harry isn't even surprised. Tom tends to find him whenever Harry has managed to slip out of his room sans guards, and all the quicker if he has recently spoken with Dumbledore. What he hasn't figured out is how he does it.

"Malta."

Riddle turns slowly, taking it all in. "I've never left Briton. Furthest I've been is Dover."

"Two years ago, right? I think that trip kicked off Hermione's palaeontology phase."

"Mhmm. The geology was also interesting."

"I bet. Did you really push Myrtle Warren off a cliff?"

"Allegedly."

"Does that mean you didn't get caught or it wasn't technically a push?"

"Not even entertaining the possibility of my innocence? Hardly fair of you."

Harry raises an eyebrow. Tom sniffs.

"She kept interrupting our guide with irrelevant trivia. She was so focused on sounding smart, I suppose she wasn't paying enough attention to where she was walking."

“Those cliffs are a hundred metres high.”

Tom rolls his eyes. “She’s a witch. She bounced.”

True. A fall would hardly kill her, but “She is still afraid of heights.”

“I suppose that explains why she would not stop crying and moaning all through the first Quidditch game. It was irritating. I heard her from the Slytherin section of the stands.”

“Well, your proximity probably didn’t help.”

Tom’s lips quirk.

“It’s not funny,” Harry sternly tells himself. He looks at the empty beach again. “Come on, I’ll show you around.”

He grabs Tom’s shoulder to brace him for the disorienting change. With a thought, the room shifts around them, and they are overlooking the beach from the highest tier of Valletta’s wall. They walk the city limits for a bit, taking in the fortified harbour, until they reach St. John's Bastion. It still surprises Harry that such an intimidating bit of architecture can be so beautiful. Tom devours every detail Harry can remember. They discuss why and when each part was built, why this city became the capital, and the series of regime changes which shaped the island. They naturally branch into the regime changes closer to home before Harry realises Tom steered the conversation there.

“Dumbledore thinks Grindelwald is vulnerable to a public uprising,” Harry says.

“He spoke to you about rebellion?”

Harry blinks out of the daze the pleasant conversation lulled him into and remembers he is not on holiday. Riddle is leaning forward intently. Harry eyes him. For all that Riddle hates Umbridge, he is still allied with the Supremacists and therefore the Ministry. Even if he wasn’t, Harry wouldn’t betray Dumbledore’s trust. He weighs his words carefully. “Not really. He just mentioned that if the Ministry were to fall, it’d be due to public uprising, not an army.”

“Oh, Dumbledore is an idiot,” Riddle says. He seems mildly put out by the realisation.

Harry raises an eyebrow.

“Public uprisings do not overthrow dictators,” Riddle says.

“I distinctly remember learning about several mobs who stormed some gates and put their own folks in charge.”

“The mobs only get in when the aurors or army let them in. Dictatorships fall from the inside,” Riddle says. “The head auror is the power behind the throne.”

Harry scrunches his nose, appalled by that man holding any meaningful power in his incompetent hands. “How did Fudge even pass auror training?”

“He is Grindelwald’s most loyal sycophant, which is a much more important qualifier for the position,” Riddle says. “His feeble abilities may add to his appeal – he is not competent enough for his ambition to pose a threat.”

“Ambition!” There’s only one higher position. “He wants to fill Grindelwald’s shoes?” Harry can’t picture it. Fudge is a lackey, not a leader. If he took the throne, it’d be as a puppet.

“Someone has to. Grindelwald hasn’t groomed an heir, and he is getting old enough for people to start thinking of the looming succession. Fudge is the next highest ranking official, so he figures the crown ought to pass to him.”

“Merlin, he wouldn’t last a week.”

“Likely not,” Riddle says unsympathetically. “Fudge doesn’t have the strength or charisma to keep the rest of the Ministry in line. He would have to allocate more of the treasury for bribes, and the economy can’t handle it. Decades of embezzlement have hurt the workforce and the reduced cashflow has reached Grindelwald’s key supporters – they are not happy.”

“No one is happy. It doesn’t seem to matter.”

“What matters is who is unhappy,” Riddle says. “Dumbledore is right about one thing, at least – Grindelwald is vulnerable to an uprising. He is getting weaker. If his key supporters can find a better deal, they’ll flip on him. In another few years they will be desperate to replace him.”

It could be what Dumbledore is waiting for. Harry leans back, so as not to look too interested. “A few years?”

“Mark my words – Grindelwald will not last the decade.”

“You don’t sound broken up about it.”

“Why would I be?”

“‘He is inspiring.’ ‘His magical power is magnetic.’ ‘The way he launched his career from the notoriety of the Games is fascinating.’ Oh, and ‘He put the practical experience in the arena to excellent use to efficiently deal with his political opponents’,” Harry quotes. Riddle didn’t say those things around the Supremacists, he can’t argue it was an act to fit in.

“Was I wrong?” Riddle raises an eyebrow to restart an old argument.

“Inspiring.” Harry wrinkles his nose.

“A twenty-one year old man, only British by marriage, defeated a sitting Minister in a popular vote and not only kept the position for a full term, but convinced the Wizengamot to abolish term limits altogether. Love him or hate him, Harry, that is incredible. The manoeuvring it must’ve taken to pull that off.”

Harry changes the subject rather that admit Grindelwald might’ve been impressive at some point. “Fudge is dreaming if he thinks he can fill those shoes. But if not him, then who?”

“Not Dumbledore,” Riddle says with a knowing and slightly scornful grin.

“He wouldn’t take the job even if they offered it,” Harry agrees.

“Probably no one else in his Order, either. They don’t have the political capital. The most they could do is put someone forward as an interim Minister.”

Harry can’t tell if he is referring to the Order in general, or specific members which Riddle shouldn’t know anything about. Harry narrows his eyes. “You are very interested and informed.” Which could also be said for any topic under the sun, but now more so than usual, and he realises, “You want to be Minister. The Order is your competition.”

Which explains why Riddle is always quick to pry into his conversations with the headmaster.

“Competition! Hardly.”

“Well, if they get in first…”

“They would have to move things forward on an expedited timeline.”

“That’s a lot of words for a coup,” Harry says, and Riddle flashes his teeth in a grin.

“Which they won’t pull off. They are not decisive enough to kick off the revolution they want. What have they done – a few guerilla strikes over the years? Dumbledore won’t start a rebellion because once that ball is rolling, it is out of control, and Dumbledore likes things to be predictable. The Order is waiting for the perfect opportunity instead of making one for themselves. Waiting for a public uprising, honestly,” he scoffs.

You might be surprised, Harry doesn’t say. Riddle doesn’t catch the thought either, because Harry is getting better at multitasking. His occlumency hasn’t slipped this entire conversation.

“Well, sounds like the opportune window will soon open and close. If it happens while you’re still stuck in here, you won’t even be in the picture,” Harry says, just for the affronted glare it gets him.

“I do not miss opportunities,” Riddle bristles. “Even if circumstances did not align to my liking, I would find a way. Which is irrelevant in this case because the perfect moment is years away, Harry, not days. Fudge is still firmly in Grindelwald’s pocket.”

“Years before or after you would beat Grindelwald’s record of youngest Minister?”

Riddle seesaws his hand. “Hard to say. But, yes, in a few years when the time is right, I think the position would suit me quite well.”

The arrogance is astounding, Harry thinks fondly. As if Riddle can declare it confidently enough, the universe will make it so. But Harry hasn’t seen him fail at anything yet, except charming Umbridge, so anything short of the impossible might not be beyond him. Suddenly, Riddle declaring Grindelwald and inspiration takes on a whole new meaning. *That* is what he has been planning.

“It’s why you entered the Games, isn’t it? To launch a political career the way he did.”

There has never been a muggleborn Minister, but there had never been a muggleborn Slytherin champion, either. Or victor. And victors

always go on to do great things. Only victors make it politics these days. If Riddle has any chance, this is it.

“That bothers you,” Tom tilts his head. “It didn’t before.”

Harry rubs a hand down his face.

“You said you wouldn’t hate me for my ambition. You respected my drive and the lengths I’ll go to realise my goals.”

“Yeah. Still true,” Harry sighs. He always knew Riddle would try to kill him for power in the abstract. Labelling it with the Minister position hits harder than it would’ve yesterday. He could die at the behest of the current Minister, for the ambition of an aspiring one. He could die for the same pointless reason as his parents – politics.

Tom stops walking and faces him head on. Every line of his body says he is not going to let this go. “Why are you upset?”

“It’s not something you can fix.”

“I can do anything. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Harry considers for a minute and starts walking again. They leave the walls and stumble upon gardens which Harry doesn’t remember. The Room could be accurate, reflecting the real world including the places he never visited, or filling in the blanks with nonsense. There is no way to tell from here.

“Dumbledore told me why my parents died.”

He watches Tom from the corner of his eye as he bites back his first instinctive response. An unhelpful reflex, then. Probably involves cursing someone. The solution Riddle settles on is actually not bad. “Do you want to talk about it, or shall I distract you?”

“To talk,” Harry decides, and does. He tells Tom why the assassins came, and what he remembers of the attack, and that he isn’t certain anymore which details really happened and which his mind invented and repeated ad nauseum in dreams. He thinks it was worse because he couldn’t see from behind his mother’s shield, and that gave free rein to his imagination. He could hear screams and spells, but he couldn’t see which ones hit. He recognises a lot more of those spells now, and what the injuries could’ve been. He tells Tom he started dreaming about it again, before the Goblet of Fire, with Ron and Hermione and a hundred others in his parents’ places.

Voicing everything, making it real helps him come to terms with it. Riddle could be a rubber duck and talking would still help, but he listens, and that is better. Unloading on him is second only to talking out his problems with Ron and Hermione. He tells Tom why they're in Malta – revisiting a holiday they took a few weeks before his family shattered. He tells Tom how much he misses his parents, and that he wishes he could ask for their advice, and confesses he doesn't know if they would approve of his choices. Hermione would understand seeking approval; Tom looks like he is struggling to understand a foreign language, but he is trying.

It is clear Tom thinks he could be doing more than just listening, mind whirling for solutions. "Did your parents leave behind a portrait? I could find a way to get it here for you."

"They didn't," Harry smiles wistfully.

Tom makes a small, frustrated sound. "This would be easier if you hadn't learnt occlumency. I'd know exactly what to do."

Harry's smile deepens into something warm. He can practically see Tom's brain ticking over their past interactions for clues. There is something fascinating about watching him study humans in real time, learning how to people like a regular person. Harry knows when he notices a pattern in Harry's behaviour – a tendency to touch Tom when trying to comfort him, to be something sturdy to lean on – because he mimics it by wrapping an arm around Harry's waist.

Harry wastes no time getting his arm around Riddle in return. "You're doing alright."

"Good," he says, and Harry feels his muscles relax.

They find the main street and plan to head for the city centre but go the wrong way and get distracted by a fountain.

"Triton," Riddle recognises the deity with interest. "Depicted with two fish tails for legs. You know, that wasn't always the case," and then he's off into theories about how, in the Roman synchronisation of Greek mythology, Triton got conflated with ichthyocentaurs, possibly due to Poseidon's association with horses.

Harry could listen for hours, but "I should be getting back."

Tom's fingers, absently playing with Harry's hem, fall still. "Are you going to be able to sleep tonight?"

Merlin, he's got intuition. "Probably not." The nightmares will be terrible, assuming Harry can quiet his mind enough to sleep at all.

"I'll stay up with you."

He is too tempted. "I should try to sleep." Only nine more days of training. He must make the most of it. "I need the rest, and so do you." It is tempting to poke the bags under Riddle's eyes, but Harry resists that too.

Tom scans his face for a long moment. He acquiesces with a nod, but adds, "Come to my room if you can't sleep." There are myriad reasons why it would be a bad idea. Tom pre-empts a few. "Come through the window – only the doors are keyed against other champions and the curfew. I swear I won't look. And I have a trip-line ward, so if the aurors get up the stairs, I'll know. You'll have time to get back to your room."

That only leaves one reason: going into his room feels a lot like a line Harry should try not to cross. He has crossed so many already – knowing there is no going back, knowing he will have to cut Tom out like a tumour and patch up the hole left behind – because it was worth it. It might still be worth it, but all Harry knows for certain is the more lines he crosses, the more it is going to hurt. Tom slotted seamlessly into Harry's life but his absence will not be as easy. Cutting him out will take parts of Harry with it. It's terrifying. He already loves –

"Not sick of me yet?" Harry jokes. They must've spent most of the evening together already. It is hard to tell when the Room is set to perpetual noon.

"I've missed talking to you," Riddle says instead of bantering back, and Harry stumbles over the tension he tried to dissipate.

"We talk in class. During some meals," Harry says, but it isn't the same. They aren't free to speak or act however they want. Increasingly, they can't talk at all; the trainers steer them away from each other, and Bellatrix is building up a resistance to Tom brushing her off.

"Is that all you want?"

Harry doesn't reply. The answer is no, of course. He is greedy for everything he can get, for as long as he can get it. He just doesn't like thinking about what he is going to lose. He knows he'll lose Tom once

they enter the arena, but he thought he could have him until then. Umbridge has already stollen so much time from them, and she'll put a stop to it entirely if she can.

The aurors are bound to get through the age lines soon, and once they get access to the dorms again, that'll be it. Harry won't be able to risk any more covert late-night meetings in here. The aurors could throw open his door whenever they please, and Merlin forbid if he isn't there where they left him. Even if he sets a warning on the dorm stairs, he wouldn't be able to fly back fast enough.

"We don't have another vial of the age line potion, do we," Harry says.

"No."

"There is an enchantment on the girls' stairs to turn into a slide when boys try to climb it. If we could tap into that–"

"It has a built-in exception for adults in case of an emergency."

"Damn. Wards?"

"Would be a brief hurdle at most. Unless you are willing to make a blood sacrifice, which would certainly keep anyone else out of your room, but then you may as well sign your work and show up to detention for the rest of training."

Harry wracks his brain but there are no better ideas hiding in the recesses.

Tom scans his face. "I'll leave my window open."

Chapter End Notes

> Harry: so Snape is only on my side because he hates Umbridge more than me.
> Snape: obviously. On an unrelated note, if anyone hurts this boy, I will kill them and then myself.
>
> It turns out, ladies and gentlemen, Severus Snape is a surprise mother hen. Only in this case it's more like he's an antisocial rooster who has no idea what to do with chicks at the best of times, but he's found himself adopting one who is so much worse than the others because it keeps throwing itself off cliffs trying to fly or running off to play with cats. RIP Snape's cortisol levels.

Also, a lot of the ideas about Grindelwald's leadership come from Rules for Rulers by CGP grey on youtube. Very informative for how power structures work in dictatorships and democracies and companies.

One of the best love songs and inspiration for the tumour analogy: You grew on me by Tim Minchin

Week 7 day seven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thunder almost drowns out Ron's voice. It has been storming on and off for days – good news for Amelia at least, who can now turn into a fierce sealion; irrelevant to Trelawny who didn't foresee an animal form helping her and gave up on the animagus ritual in the second week; and mildly annoy to Harry who is trying to make out Ron's voice.

This storm is more intense than the others, but between rumbles there is a creak of hinges, a flash of movement as the door opens. Harry whips around to see Riddle. He steps between Riddle and the glowing blue terrier, but there is nothing he can do to silence it.

"… and it's mental, mate. The DA are furious with Umbridge and the shit the Ministry are saying about you. Neville acted out in class. *Neville*. Anyway, Fred and George are suspended for the first week of the next term – they're *this close* to being expelled – and the scary thing is I don't think mum minds."

Ron's patronus fades out.

"How did you get in here?" Harry asks. The Room has never let someone in when he wanted privacy. An unlocking charm wouldn't cut it.

"No door in this castle would refuse me entry," Riddle says. The wording piques Harry's interest, but Riddle continues. "So that is how you're getting news from the rest of the world." He is, no doubt, storing the information in case of blackmail.

Well, there's no hiding it. Harry waves the wand and Prongs lands alert, his great head turned toward Riddle. Harry says, "Tell Ron I've got to go. Keep to the schedule for the next meeting."

Prongs bounds to the window and vanishes as he hits the glass.

Tom tilts his head. "Is it cast differently to carry messages?"

"No," Harry says. "Did Moody not mention it?"

“I wouldn’t know. I didn’t attend that class.”

“Hmm,” Harry hadn’t either. He had no need, and figures Riddle is in the same boat, but it hasn’t stopped him before. “Didn’t feel like showing off?”

“Actually,” Tom says slowly, coming further into the room. He weighs his words. “It is a spell which eludes me. I did not wish to put my weaknesses on public display right before a lot of people try to kill me.”

Harry blinks, more surprised that Tom is volunteering him the information than anything. “Do you want help?”

“Are you offering?” Tom’s face is blank, which might as well be a sign of genuine shock. If he was angling for tutoring, he would have had an appropriate expression lined up.

Now Harry has no idea why Riddle brought it up. But still, “Sure.”

“I am your enemy.”

“I’m not a dementor,” Harry says. The patronus is one of very few spells with no creative offensive applications. Why wouldn’t he help?

Tom scans his face for a long moment. He shakes his head. “Okay.”

“Show me?” Harry asks. He strongly suspects he knows what the problem is, because the alternative is that this is the one spell that Tom has messed up the incantation, but he wants to establish a baseline.

Tom taps a finger to his holster. His wand slips free, and he casts a weak white mist. He looks annoyed with himself. “I know what you’re going to say. My memory isn’t happy enough. I’m not sure there’s much I can do about that.”

Riddle is right, but “It’s about the feeling it evokes more than the memory itself. And you don’t have to feel happy.”

Tom looks up sharply. “What?”

Harry taps his fingers, considering how to answer. “I think of my parents,” Harry admits. It’s not how he usually teaches this spell, a bit more personal than his classmates need to know. “Every memory I have of them is bittersweet. But they made me feel safe.”

“Bittersweet. Because they use to take care of you and give you things you wanted until they couldn’t anymore? I had a pet, she died when I was a child, and I miss her. Is that the same?”

“Not quite.” Harry isn’t sure if Tom confused about parents or unconditional love or about the emotions in general. “You want something that makes you feel strongly and makes you feel strong.”

“How does missing your parents make you feel strong?”

Harry would be cut by the callousness if Riddle didn’t just sound utterly baffled. He can’t explain it in words Tom will understand. He can either move on or try another way.

Harry lowers the first of his mental drawbridges and hears Tom’s quick intake of breath. He thinks *mum and dad* and his chest aches. There is no particular memory, no singular moment he realised *this is why I love them*. It is a deep well of peace, contentment and sadness. They’re never coming back. But the grief doesn’t change how much he loves them. The details of his memories may fade with time, but so long as his soul is still in his body, he will remember being loved.

Harry opens his eyes. Riddle is closer than he’d expected, watching intently.

“You’re not happy at all,” he says. He reaches for Harry’s face but aborts the movement halfway.

Harry smiles. “*Expecto patronum*.”

Prongs forms slowly and Harry finds himself amongst the antlers as the deer nuzzles his cheek. Tom touches the deer’s flank like he is not certain it’s there. He pulls back to examine tingling fingers.

“The books are wrong,” Tom says, affronted.

“Sort of? Happiness works well. It just might not be the deepest, strongest feeling you’ve got. Strength is more important than the tone.”

“They say the patronus is a decoy made of pure joy for the dementors to feed off instead. Clearly that is baseless speculation.”

“Maybe. Remember, the spell wasn’t invented to fight dementors and lethifolds – that came later, along with the shield form. Originally, the corporal patronus was for baring your soul.”

Tom looks disturbed and fascinated.

“That’s why you’ve got to reach deep down. It can’t be surface level feelings that change day to day, or a memory of a one-off event unless it cut you to the core. Riding a broom or acing an exam or a first kiss – those kinds of memories don’t work.”

“Doesn’t have to be happy,” Tom muses. “And I suppose it would be easier to reach for a different emotion when dementors are around.”

Harry shakes his head. “Dementors leech everything until life seems pointless. They make you feel empty, depressed. Joy, hope, determination – every feeling is gone before you even know what’s happening.”

“You’ve encountered dementors before,” Riddle realises.

“The Ministry sent them looking for my godfather. I’m not a fan,” he says. It’s only thanks to Remus that Harry survived. He wonders, sometimes, if they were supposed to be casualties to punish Sirius and clear up the problems the Ministry see with the succession of the Black family.

“They make an impression, I’m sure,” Tom says.

Harry snorts. Riddle might be referring to how quickly Harry’s boggart cleared a classroom. It was popular gossip in third year. “Anyway, your memory – find the reason you have to keep living when everything sucks.”

“I will need to think on it,” Tom says after a moment. “Thank you, Harry.”

“Thank me when you manage it,” Harry says and means it. He wants to know. The only students he failed to teach were the clinically depressed; they needed Madam Pomfrey’s help, not Harry’s.

“Not just for the lesson,” Tom says.

“Then what for?”

Tom turns away abruptly. “You like me for my competence.”

“I’m *attracted* to your competence,” Harry corrects. He likes Tom for that reason and more, but it won’t do anyone any good to admit he likes Riddle at all.

“Regardless. I suppose I am thanking you for not judging me. For not being disappointed.”

“I don’t expect you to be able to do everything flawlessly the first time. What kind of pedestal do you think I’ve put you on?” Harry’s lips quirk. “And I’m not going to use it against you.”

“I know. Others would, but not you.” Riddle doesn’t turn back. There is tension in his shoulders, a rigidity anticipating a blow.

Harry’s smile gentles. He steps closer until he can lay his fingers on Tom’s elbow. “You know what else I find attractive? Someone who is not too insecure to ask for help. Bravery.”

“Slander,” Tom turns at last, catching Harry’s arm to stop him stepping away. Riddle’s breath on his face seems to steal his own. “I want to try the spell again. Could you keep your surface thoughts open?”

“You need to learn how to cast if with your own emotions. You shouldn’t rely on mine.”

“I’m not using yours. I like sensing your mind. It makes me… hmm, not happy, I don’t think, but something close to it. Something strong.”

“Fuck, Riddle,” Harry ducks, cheeks burning, “you can’t just say that.” Tom admitting that he likes Harry won’t do either of them good, either. Harry looks back up and it’s worse because Tom is wearing the wicked grin that does things to Harry’s insides.

Tom’s grin widens. “*Expecto patronum*.”

A white shield streams from his wand, and it brightens when Harry beams. “Great! That’ll hold off one or two.”

Tom looks relieved and more than a little miffed. “The number of times I have tried that spell. Honestly. Those bloody books.”

…

Harry, strictly speaking, did not have time for an impromptu patronus lesson. If he could fly straight to meet McGonagall, maybe he’d make it, but he must return to Gryffindor tower first. He’d only planned to catch up on news for a few minutes and left his shower running to placate anyone listening through the omnioculars. Twenty minutes may be pushing the excuse a little, but he’s a healthy teenage boy who

just spent an hour sparring with fit trainer McLaggen. Let them draw their own conclusions.

After a change of clothes, a few cleaning charms which leave his skin dry but flushed enough to pass muster, and dousing his head under the tap, he thunders downstairs. He arrives at McGonagall's classroom a few minutes late and his auror escorts arrive quite out of breath.

"Nice of you to join us, Mr Potter," McGonagall says. "The Latin *loco* means?"

"Er… crazy? Wait, no – location?"

"Position, yes. And *moto*?"

"Movement."

"Moving. It is a verb, not a noun. I trust you can deduce the incantation for the spell I expect of you this morning."

Hermione is standing next to a suit of armour, hand to mouth and gauntlet to helmet respectively. He can't tell if she is scandalised by his tardiness, or by how chipper he looks despite almost getting a question wrong.

Harry perks up even further. McGonagall is famous for animating all the statues in the castle in her Games. "Piertotum locomotor."

"You will start with chess pieces," McGonagall says.

McGonagall doesn't curtail her lessons for anything, which cuts into the time Harry was planning to spend healing, then Hopkirk wants to test him on *just one more* spell and the healer is inspired by the intensifying storm to learn about electrocutions and treating abnormal heart rhythms, and soon enough Harry is checking the time wondering if it's worth going to the hall or straight to the kitchens. It was worth it. He'd miss lunch every day if it meant more time with Riddle.

But apparently skipping meals is not an option. "The lunch hours is almost over, Mr Potter," the auror tells him.

Harry hums but casts again. He wants to get the spell right.

There is a flash of movement as the auror grabs for his arm. Harry dodges on reflex. "I heard you." Harry sets his shoulders.

"You will miss lunch."

“So what? I’m not hungry.” A lie. “And I don’t *have* to go. It’s not compulsory.”

Which is not the kind of thing to say to someone working in an occupation where the primary draw is the power trip.

Harry is still riding a wave of indignant defiance but knows better than the duck the hand a second time, lest he be stunner and dragged to the hall instead of simply manhandled. The auror marches him into the Great Hall.

Something is wrong. He stops, bringing the auror up short, and tries to put his finger on the trigger.

The most obvious difference is a white block as tall as Hagrid in the place where the goblet of fire had condemned them. Lightning reveals deep sickle-shaped shadows and a pool of cloth at the base. And there are more omnioculars than usual. Umbridge looks up and smiles at Harry while an auror hands her something small.

Harry jerks his arm, testing the auror’s grip. It holds firm. His hand stands on end. There is more to this than the auror getting a kick out of pushing him around.

Umbridge stands. “Confiscate Mr Potter’s wand.”

“What! Why?”

“This was found in your room, Mr Potter,” Umbridge says. So the aurors have gotten past the age line at last. She holds up a vial Harry has never seen.

“What’s that supposed to be?”

“It is an age line potion, as you very well know,” she says. “You are guilty of owning forbidden items, using magic outside the training rooms, and interfering with official auror business.”

“Seriously? You’re so desperate to be right about the culprit that you planted evidence in my room?”

“Delusional as well,” Umbridge smiles sweetly, and Harry realises he has fallen into a trap. “The pressure of the competition is clearly too much for your delicate nerves. A contamination from your mother’s blood, no doubt. You ought to spend several days confined to the infirmary after you have served your punishment.”

Harry closes his mouth and thinks quickly. He can hardly protest it is impossible to brew a batch now when they've deployed them so effectively. He can't say much else without shifting blame to Hermione and Tom. A helpless feeling rises in his chest.

Umbridge flicks her wand and the sheet flies away, revealing an X made of out wood planks. The next rumbling flash of the enchanted ceiling imprints the shape on his retinas and reveals silver chains wrap around the upper arms.

The fine hairs on Harry's neck stand on end.

"Do you know what this is?" Umbridge asks him.

"Ooh!" Bellatrix bounces on her toes and waves a hand like a first-year.

Umbridge smiles indulgently but doesn't let her interrupt the speech. "This is how we at the Ministry unravel webs of seditious conspirators."

The preparation, the script, the timing for the busiest meal. Harry folds his arms. "Yeah, tell me again how you weren't planning this?"

Umbridge ignores him. "It is impossible for you to have caused all the trouble around here unless you can be in two places at once. I know you have accomplices."

"*Or* the reason it is impossible for Harry to set off the pranks is because he didn't do them," Hermione stands and pushes past the auror.

"Sit down, you silly girl, unless you want to admit you are a partner in crime."

She only moves to slip her hand into Harry's.

"Don't," Harry says quietly. Don't admit to anything. Their backs are against to wall, but nothing is set until they confess. No sense for Hermione to get in trouble too.

Harry squeezes her hand and then steps forward, away from her. "What's this thing do, then?"

"You will be flogged until you confess or give me names. If you pass out, you will be rennervated. If we flay off all your nervous tissue, we

will regrow it and continue on the new, sensitive skin. We have enough potions to keep you alive until we toss you into the arena."

"That's barbaric! Moreover, torture is an ineffectual way to get information. People will say whatever you want to hear to get the pain to stop," Hermione tries. It isn't going to work.

"The beauty of questioning multiple people, Miss Granger, is we can compare their answers for alignment," Umbridge says. "You will learn, Mr Potter, the risk of friendship, and we will learn the full extent of your crimes before I decide how extensive your punishment will be. What else are you guilty of, I wonder, that you have confided in your friends?"

Umbridge meets Harry's eyes. Then she turns, with malicious glee, to stare between Hermione and Görder with consideration.

Harry's stomach plummets to his toes.

Umbridge smiles. "Miss Görder –"

But the little witch is gone. A tiny stoat bolts for the shadows, still wobbly and unused to her new feet. Harry twitches his fingers to send a shield before the stunners reach her, and then her mentor steps in front of the aurors, wand raised.

Umbridge tsks. "How should I interpret such a display, Miss Görder? Only criminals fear the law."

"You're wrong!" Harry shouts. "The ones with nothing to hide have the most to fear. We can't confess or give you names if we don't know anything, so when will you stop, huh?"

Umbridge tilts her head. "You would rather I interrogate you, wouldn't you? You have displayed a pattern of conceited self-sacrificing behaviour," she says, and Harry stills as she sees through him. "Such antiquated ideas of nobility, but I suppose you are too far gone for correction. Give me the names of your accomplices, Mr Potter, and I won't have to flog anyone else."

"This is your last chance, all of you." Umbridge scans the crowd of pale students, inviting them to speak up. "If you turn yourself in, I will reduce the punishment, but if I get your name from someone else, you will receive double the lashes. There will be no more disruptions. If you run, I will consider it an admission of guilt and you will receive ten lashes *before* I start asking questions."

Harry watches Riddle out of the corner of his eye. He isn't stepping forward.

"Anyone? No?" Umbridge pouts. "Pity. Well then –"

"It's Sirius Black," Harry says.

"Sirius Black!"

"Your Ministry has been searching for years, well he's been hiding in the most secure building in Britain," Harry says, spewing out bullshit as quickly as the ideas form. "He's in the castle. He pulled the pranks. He's been doing that sort of thing since his own school days."

"Where is he now?" Umbridge demands urgently.

"Right now?" Harry shrugs. "He can get around unseen, and he knows the castle better than anyone. He's an animagus, a rat."

At the last word, her anticipation changes flavour. "That will be another ten lashes for lying during an investigation. Your godfather's form is a large black dog," Umbridge says, and Harry's heart seizes. "But you'll wait your turn."

Umbridge flicks her wand at the rack and the manacles twist through the air toward Hermione and punch straight through Harry's protego. The grey jaws clamp around her wrist and drag her off her feet, screaming.

Harry lunges and manages to catch her around the waist, but it doesn't slow the chains and he is pulled off his feet. They are dragged across the rough stone and hauled upright. When they lurch to a stop, Harry gets a grip on the manacle before a dozen different hands descend and try to pry him off. A spell forces his fingers to release; another turns his legs to jelly when he kicks out.

The aurors drag him back, but Harry pulls a move McLaggen taught him weeks ago and stumbles free. The aurors let him retreat a few paces, while the champions around him scramble away. There is now a line of aurors between him and Hermione, between him and Umbridge, wands ready. They're merely an obstacle; Umbridge is his enemy. He backs away, far enough that he can dodge anything they might cast. He stares over their heads and bares his teeth. His mouth tastes coppery, and he doesn't think it is his blood.

Umbridge looks delighted.

Hermione hangs from the rack, feet barely touching the floor. After the initial shock she refuses to scream, but her back is tense and flexing with rapid, terrified breaths. Her fingers clench and unclench around a ring that isn't there. "*But in the end it's only a passing thing, this shadow; even darkness must pass*," she says. By the third repetition, her voice has risen above a murmur. She stops trembling.

"What was that, dear?" Umbridge says.

Hermione twists around to glare, and quotes, "*Despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not*." The chains rattle as she flips Umbridge off.

Harry covertly tries relashio and a dozen more obscure spells that are all equally ineffective. He can't get her free, and even if he could, there is nowhere to go – they might get out of the Hall, but not the castle. But they are not alone. Krum is chanting something under his breath. All the Hogwarts professors have their wands drawn. The whip turns into a snake and bites the auror holding it before it is banished. There are half a dozen more shields around Hermione than Harry can account for. They can get through this, together.

Umbridge sighs. "Well, the whip is more traditional but if you're going to be like that, then the cruciatus will do."

Umbridge finds Harry in the crowd, and she smiles at him. Smug, because she knows she has forced his hand. Confident, because she doesn't know what's coming.

Snape does. He is striding across the Hall towards Harry, but too far away to stop it.

The auror with Harry's wand is holding onto it tight. Disarming instead of summoning spell, then.

"Do you have anything to say to me, Mr Potter?"

Yes: two words. He'll have one chance at her, so it'd better be a spell she can't shield, and she's not quick enough to dodge, and he knows just the thing.

He starts to move, but a hand clamps down on Harry's, locking his wrist and fingers. It doesn't budge when he tries to shrug it off, or flinch away when Harry sends a glare which could melt steal.

"Move it or lose it, Riddle," Harry says and means every word.

“Give me five minutes. If all else fails, they open with a password: veritas odit moras,” Riddle murmurs, then he raises his voice. “I have a question, Madam Umbridge.”

She narrows her eyes. “Detention for touching a fellow champion. For the both of you,” she says. “This had better be good, Mr Riddle. If you haven’t noticed, I have more important things to do than answer your questions.”

“Oh, but you are the only one who can. It won’t take long,” Riddle smiles. “I followed up on your recommended readings and have some questions about some current members of the sacred twenty-eight. No doubt you are on intimate terms, as the records show you a quite a close cousin, descended from Rowel Selwyn.”

She is not easily flattered. “Your question, Mr Riddle.”

“Did you know when you were falsifying records that Rowel Selwyn died of dragon pox when he was three years old?” Tom says. The words land in the dead silence. Harry feels too shocked to move or speak, until he raises his occlumency shields and he can suddenly breathe again. The air is dense and cold and still – a perfect stage. Tom is doing something, the rest of room is under his spell, except Snape. His sharp movements stand out in the stillness as he turns a wary look from Riddle to Harry. Snape is briefly surprised to see Harry is free, and then alarmed to imagine what he might do with it. But Harry has no intention of a reckless charge just yet. He can wait four minutes.

Tom saunters to the front of the Hall and leans back against the Slytherin table, hands in pockets, still placidly smiling. Maybe by now, Umbridge has realised there is something dangerous behind his teeth.

“Was Rowel’s date of death lost in that nasty fiendfyre accident centuries ago with the other records, or did you scrub the information while you were working in your first job as a filing clerk in the Ministry Archives? I simply must know. It’s the last piece of the puzzle I’m missing, you see, and I hate leaving things unfinished.”

“Sedition! False accusations! I’ll have you on the rack for this!” Umbridge shouts as the cold constriction lessens, as Tom allows her enough rope to hang herself. “Rowel Selwyn moved to Belgium and his daughter married into the Umbridge family, and their grandson emigrated back to Britain.”

“I am sure the records are very convincing,” Tom waves a hand, and

the objection off as an errant fly. He doesn't let her do more than stutter. "Anything to distance yourself from your father, Orford Umbridge, who mopped floors in the Ministry. Who, before he was demoted to Maintenance, ventured into the other world as a muggleborn searcher, where he impregnated a muggle woman and your mother, Ellen Cracknell. Who smuggled you back without registering you as muggleborn. And while you may not be entirely muggleborn, you were certainly muggle raised. No accidental magic until you were nine, why, your father almost gave you up as a squib. You knew a witch of your talent would never amount to anything unless you had ties to the right people, so you impersonated a pureblood."

Umbridge is ghostly pale. "How– how–?"

"How do I know?" Riddle finishes with the most incriminating question he could've picked. "You missed a few loose ends. Nothing is ever truly secret."

So says the mind reader. Harry's lips twitch with something deeper than amusement or vicious satisfaction for Umbridge getting due comeuppance.

"Now, impersonating a pureblood is a serious crime. But only criminals fear the law," Tom parrots, outright smirking now.

Harry's grin broadens to match. This is Tom Riddle in his element – shredding a vile woman's life and reputation, performing grand speeches to captivate an audience. Harry didn't know he could derive such pleasure from watching someone he likes do what they are good at and enjoy. Tom manipulates and plots and lies and holds back information until the perfect dramatic moment, not just to further his schemes to accumulate more power, Harry realises, but because he finds it *fun*. This is Tom Riddle having the time of his life. If he didn't want to become a politician, he'd be an actor.

"If you've nothing to fear, I'm sure you can explain why the information I have here is all a terrible misunderstanding, rather than the clear evidence it appears to be." Riddle pulls out a ream of parchment from Merlin knows where. Harry wouldn't be surprised if he needed an undetectable expansion charm on his underwear to contain his sheer balls.

Tom drops the scrolls in the hands of the nearest auror. From the auror's expression, you'd think it was a leaky vial of basilisk venom.

“Duplicates. I’ve hidden the originals somewhere safe. We wouldn’t want her to selectively edit those records as well. Of course, these are only accusations until proven. But now the onus of proof is on you, Madam Umbridge. It would be easy – a single photograph of you before nine years old would do it. If such photos existed. The truth will always be exposed, or as the Romans say – truth hates delay. Veritas odit moras.”

And Hermione’s chains open. She lands clumsily, not expecting it, but her wits are ready as soon as her feet are beneath her, and she runs for cover. She finds shelter behind Harry, McGonagall and Snape, and in pandemonium as the oppressive atmosphere lifts and everyone starts talking and moving at once.

Tom stumbles as soon as the spotlight moves off him. He is taking deep, careful breaths, and holding his hands where no one can see them shake. Riddle never shows weakness in public. If he is weak enough that he can’t even pretend not to be, the stunt took a lot out of him. He is vulnerable now, when Umbridge could lash out once she recovers from the shock. Harry wants to rush over, but he limits himself to a slow walk to avoid drawing attention.

Riddle waves him off before he has taken a few steps. He gestures at the door. Harry hesitates, but a clammy hand on his shoulder to make the decision for him.

“Come, Potter,” Snape says, and propels Harry with one hand and Hermione with the other. “I warned you! But you just had to be loud and proud about your loyalty to your friends. Now Umbridge knows all she has to do to get information out of you is to hurt someone you care about,” Snape rants.

Harry is silent. Snape is right. Hermione and the rest of their alliance aren’t safe while Umbridge thinks she can get information out of Harry. She isn’t going to stop. She is distracted now, arguing with the officials behind a privacy spell. Her priorities have switched from ruining other people’s lives to preserving her own. The people Umbridge trampled on her ascent to the top will be sharks circling in the water. The only one who can save her now is Grindelwald, and he wouldn’t do it for her sake, but for his own. This scandal makes the Ministry look like fools, and if Tom is right, Grindelwald can’t afford it. He must save face by either cutting her loose or burying the evidence. Probably the latter, until the news becomes impossible to contain. The world won’t see the omniocular footage unless he permits it, and most witnesses can’t get word out of the castle. Harry is going

to tell Sirius and Luna the first moment he can. He won't waste this chance to get rid of Umbridge for good. They must. Champions can leave the Hall without her noticing for now, but the reprieve will only last until she gets a handle on the situation. She might even try to assert control with torture again because there is nothing to stop her. The aurors didn't swarm to arrest her; they don't enforce laws, they carry out orders – *Umbridge's* orders, unless she is demoted or retired or whatever the word is for when your overlord declares you obsolete and feeds you to dementors.

…

Snape propels the party into the nearest empty classroom and wards the door shut behind an auror who must be fresh out of Hogwarts because the potion master's glare still has him quaking in his boots.

"You gave me your word, Potter," Snape spits. His eyes burn with a thousand more incriminating accusations he is not *quite* livid enough to air in front of witnesses.

"I kept it," Harry bites back. He scratches his arm. His wand weighs a few grams, but it means a lot more, and he feels off-balance without it in his holster.

"So Umbridge is going to keep my wand for the rest of training," Harry starts, hoping to skip the castigation part of the session by jumping straight to problem solving.

Snape shoots him a dirty look but lets him get away with it. "And if she keeps it longer?"

"I'll take someone else's," Harry shrugs.

"Oh, you'll just take a wand from an armed opponent, will you?"

"Yeah. I'll have to, won't I?" He'll figure out *how* if or when it happens. That is a problem for later Harry to deal with. Current Harry has more immediate things on his plate. "Training." There are options. He can get a spare wand from the Room. He could practice with Hermione's or even Snape's if he is feeling particularly generous.

"Don't get too excited," Snape says as soon as he sees the Potter plotting face. "Whatever loophole you find, Umbridge will close. She wants to stop you training."

Harry crosses his arms. "I'm not going to spend the next week sitting

on my arse."

"You'll spend it chained to an infirmary bed or a torture rack if you're not careful."

McGonagall clears her throat and raises an eyebrow. Harry shuts his mouth. Snape does something similar which he would claim is merely coincidentally timed. "We believe it would be best if neither of you attend classes any longer. We will pivot to personal training."

Harry barely contains a groan. Thirteen hours a day of quality time with Snape. Then something worse occurs to him – if he has to endure Snape without an outlet, he is going to stab someone, possibly himself. "Does the gym count?"

"No, Potter," McGonagall says.

Harry relaxes marginally.

"And the library?" Hermione asks.

"You can still use the library," McGonagall says and conjures a chair for each of them. She looks pale. "Tactical lessons are in order for the rest of the day, I should think. You are facing a kelpie alone while deep in the lake – tell me ten different ways of getting back to shore and five ways to subdue it without attracting more attention."

Getting away from Snape and McGonagall without an argument made Harry believe he'd escaped the lecture entirely. He was wrong.

"What the fuck, Potter?" Roger says.

He is agitated, standing abruptly from an armchair as soon as Harry enters the common room. Across from him, Cedric winces and looks away.

"Hey," Harry protests. "I am not stupid enough to keep a potion in my room."

"That's even worse! Merlin's balls, what are they going to do in the arena? Which everyone near you will be caught up in?" Roger says and he scowls at Cedric. "This alliance is a fucking death sentence."

"We can overcome anything they throw at us," Harry says.

"You don't know that! You *hope* that *we* can overcome anything they throw at *you*. You need us. You're using us."

“That’s not fair, Roger,” Cedric says in his quiet and firm way.

It cools some of Harry’s indignation. Roger is talking out his arse. When he’s not so shocked and scared, he’ll think clearly. “You know me better than that. If I was a liability, I’d put my hand up to leave. I’m not. I’m the best fighter we’ve got.”

“Oh, you think you’re all that. News flash – you’re no better than the rest of us.”

Harry opens his mouth to protest but realises he can’t. Roger hasn’t seen him train with Snape. He has only seen Harry holding back, tempering his most lethal reflexes. The alliance couldn’t possibly know Harry is their best chance against Riddle and Bellatrix. Harry never trusted them with it.

He immediately feels horrible. They’re his friends, he should trust them. He could tell them he’s got more up his sleeves – Bellatrix isn’t around and Cedric, at least, would believe him. Cedric is a reliable bloke, the kind to stick through thick and thin, Harry knows from the DA last year. And yet, the words won’t come, strangled by the anxious twist in his guts.

Instead he says, “Umbridge wants Bellatrix to win. Together, we’re a threat to that. Don’t you see? She wants to divide us.”

“Not everything is a conspiracy. You pissed them off and put all of us in danger!”

“*I* pissed them off!” Harry scoffs, frustrated. Roger must know it isn’t that simple. “Umbridge has fuck all reason to tie me to the pranks – she thinks it’s me because she hates me. She hates me because I refuse to play the Game by their rules – I’m trying to get as many of us to survive as I can, instead of trying to win. Forgive me for trying to break the trend.” Should he have said sorry Roger, you can’t sit with us, our alliance is full, Hermione is plenty good at potions, so we don’t need you? Probably wouldn’t go over well; Roger is touchy. “If you don’t believe me, ask Moody. He warned me the Ministry would try this in week *two*. They apply pressure to break up strong alliances because they want a sole victor.”

“And you didn’t warn us? It concerns us all. We had a right to know the risks.”

Harry distinctly remembers mentioning it. “Didn’t we speak about –” but no, that was with Riddle. Most of his meaningful conversations

have been with Riddle, if only because they mostly take place where the Ministry can't listen in. "You really didn't know?" Harry blinks. Everyone must've realised. It was transparent – banning sports and hobbies and restricting socialising. He didn't need Moody to tell him that. Harry couldn't have imagined how much further Umbridge would take it, or he might've cobbled together a plan to downplay the alliance. Instead, he noticed Umbridge's early efforts weren't enough to break their bonds, and figured they'd beaten the odds.

Too optimistic.

Even as the alliance became more isolated from the other champions, Harry believed it would stay together. Ganz and Penchev avoiding Harry made sense because their agreement is supposed to be a secret. But the friendlier champions like Aubert, Boutin and Garnier stopped casually chatting in classes and then stopped accepting advice – stressed about the looming deadline, Harry thought.

But now Fleur, Ivankova and Trelawny are gone. Görder might steer clear since Harry's protection almost got her whipped. Amelia will be torn between Cedric and Görder, or Cedric might feel it is his duty to protect them and leave. If Roger is determined to argue now, there might not be much alliance left.

"We didn't know, how could we – you kept it to yourself!" Roger seems pretty damn determined.

Harry is abruptly fed up. "The only thing Moody told me that I hadn't already realised was they'd target *me* because I'm the common link between us. I didn't realise I needed to warn you," Harry glares. Roger is stuck on assigning blame for some miscommunication, while Harry is trying to think about their bigger problems. How is anyone supposed to defeat the Blood Supremacists, now? Harry thinks he and Hermione could take Bellatrix, if they get the drop on her, but she won't be alone. She will run roughshod over the rest of the competition until she is tragically pushed into the acromantula colony or something, and then Riddle will take out anyone left.

It is small consolation that if Harry fails, at least Tom will live. Very small consolation. The last spark if everything has entirely gone to hell. He does not love Tom more than he loves Hermione and Cedric and Amelia and Roger, even when he's being a wanker, and the heartbroken families they will leave behind. Harry has too many reasons to live.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, alright? And I’m sorry they figured out they can use you against me. But I’m not sorry for our friendship. I’ll never be sorry for *trying*,” he says. Roger looks like Harry has kicked his feet out from under him. “I’m not sorry for thinking our bonds are too strong for them to break, and that we could call their bluff. Because it is a bluff.” Dumbledore showed him as much. The Ministry’s power is mostly illusion. “In the end, it is us against each other and against the arena. And the arena is full of Umbridge’s influence, but it is only influence. They can’t actually press a button and smite us from on high. They want to–” stop us. No, that is an admission of guilt, “–control us, well they’ve been *trying*. They can’t even control a few measly fireworks.”

Roger gasps. Harry said the quiet part out loud. Dumbledore would be proud of him. Snape would kill them both.

“It’s saying that sort of shit that got you in this mess,” Roger says. He stumbles away, almost tripping over the stairs before turning and running to his room.

Harry might’ve fucked up. He rubs his forehead with a heavy sigh.

“He’ll calm down,” Cedric says, but without much confidence.

Harry peers between his fingers. Cedric is very pale.

“You have to understand, Harry – not everyone is as brave as you.”

Harry snorts. He doesn’t feel brave. Resigned and terrified in turns. He admits, “I’ve been scared shitless since September.”

“Yet you’re still fighting for what you care about.” Cedric tilts his head. “I think I understand Gryffindors a bit better, after getting to know you.”

It must be the same way Harry understands Hufflepuff loyalty.

Cedric looks to the dorms. “I’m gonna check on him.”

Harry follows him to the stairs. He has no desire to remain in the common room alone with the aurors.

At Harry’s door, Cedric pauses to squeeze his shoulder. “For the record, I’m not sorry we’re friends either. Take care of yourself, Harry.”

No one can steady a person as fast as Cedric Diggory. Fred and George could get a mourner to laugh, but it's not the same soft confidence. It keeps Harry warm through his shower and as he readies himself for bed, until he leaves the bathroom and discovers he is not alone.

"The fuck are you doing here?" His hand goes to his holster – empty of course – and it gets his back up even more. "Hiding more potions vials?"

The auror doesn't blink. "I will remain here to ensure you are not up to anything."

"All night – you're going to watch me *sleep?*" Or stun him and drag him off in the middle of the night so Umbridge can have at him without interruptions just to make herself feel better.

In the end, the auror doesn't watch Harry sleep; he watches Harry sit awake and ready all night.

Long before dawn, Harry has had enough.

Chapter End Notes

> Anyone want to place a bet on what Tom's patronus form will be?
>
> Hermione quoted Lord of the Rings again, first the phrase Fred inscribed on the invisibility ring for her, then she quoted one of Gandalf's lines.
>
> I only did a quick edit on this one because I'm flat out at the moment. It's a bit clunky in places but it was that or make you wait until Christmas. I hope to get the next four chapters out on the regular fortnightly schedule anyway since they're already written.

Week 8 day one to four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment curfew ends, Harry is out of bed and banging on the gym door to be let in early to work out his frustration. Hermione meets him there once it officially opens. Neither of them want to be separated for long after what nearly happened yesterday. They spend just as long in the library in the afternoon. Harry sticks to her like glue all day, waiting for Umbridge to strike again, and the relief when she doesn't is enough that he doesn't begrudge Snape's perpetual presence too much.

Before he knows it, it is near curfew and the aurors are impatient to escort him back to the dorm. He stops in the fourth floor bathroom. Their expressions say they suspect he is delaying just to make their jobs difficult. Harry shuts the door in their faces. They haven't reached the point of following him into the stalls just yet. The stalls in this bathroom have tiny windows just out of reach. A flick of his fingers and the window opens on silenced hinges.

He transforms and flies away, pausing only to magic the window closed again.

He flies to the seventh floor and sneaks into the Room.

"Dobby?"

There is a pop. "Is the great Harry Potter needing something from Dobby?" the elf asks hopefully.

"Could you keep an eye on my friends? Especially Tom. After what he did…" Harry hopes Umbridge will be too busy with damage control but he wouldn't put it past her to hurt Tom on principle.

Dobby nods, ears flapping, "Dobby will do it."

"Let me know if Umbridge is planning to question them over my whereabouts."

"Whereabouts is Harry Potter going to be?"

"I'm going to stay here."

“Oh no,” Dobby wrings his ears and notices the bed for the first time. And Harry’s quidditch posters and photos on the bright, cheery walls. His desk, his dresser, probably with magical replicas of his clothes which will only exist in here. If he doesn’t want to find himself suddenly naked, he’d better borrow from the Room of Hidden Things. Same for books. If the Black Library is downstairs, it will be full of blank pages, unfortunately; they could’ve been very useful. But he's not sure it the library is even there, or if the bathroom and Regulus’ master bedroom is down the hall. “Yous will be getting in big trouble. Students is supposed to stay in dorms.”

“I’m already in big trouble. Umbridge doesn’t want me to train. She isn’t going to let me sleep. It is just a matter of time before I’m strung up and flogged within an inch of my life.” He wouldn’t be doing anyone good or even proving a point by going through that. He’ll get angry enough to snap at Umbridge at some point. And that’s if she only hurts him. If she touches Hermione, he’ll kill her.

His mum taught him that when he is angry with someone, to walk away until he calms down. So he is walking away.

“Does it help if I tell you Professor Snape knows I’m here?” Harry did terribly in their occlumency practice earlier to share the plan, and Snape didn’t go off his dial, which Harry took as tacit approval.

Dobby thinks about it and nods, to Harry’s relief. If Dobby got it in his head to help in his own way, things would get hazardous. “Dobby will watch Harry Potter’s friends.”

“Thank you.”

…

Harry sleeps undisturbed. Umbridge doesn’t come for his friends, and Dobby doesn’t come for him. It was his stomach that woke him – he is starving. Catching up on sleep carried him through later than usual. He clatters downstairs before he remembers the kitchen won’t have food, and then the world tilts a bit sideways because Severus Snape is sitting at the dining table writing in a worn black notebook. There is a half-forgotten plate and empty teacup beside him. He doesn’t look up.

“Take a seat, Potter. Unless you plan to waste the *entire* day.”

He is in Harry’s usual spot, and it feels weird to take Regulus’ chair despite knowing his surrogate uncle isn’t about to use it, so he sits across from Snape.

A plate of food pops in from the Hogwarts kitchens. “Thanks,” Harry tells the house elves, the word falling like a stone.

Harry clears most of the plate in heavy silence. He is not game to talk while Snape is busy, but then Snape closes his book and just stares with mild irritation at whatever flaw he has managed to find now, and Harry can’t take it. “How’d Umbridge react to my disappearance?”

“Poorly.” At least Snape never insists on exchanging good mornings and small talk before getting to business. Rather the opposite. “She is determined to find you before anyone knows you’ve disappeared. She is fixated on it to the exclusion of all other tasks, which will likely continue when people start to notice.”

Harry’s shoulders relax. As long as she’s too busy to indulge her masochistic streak, he won’t have to do anything drastic.

“What about you?”

“I am taking a well-earned rest in my rooms as I see no need to exert myself while my idiot student cannot stop sulking about the castle long enough to show up to my lessons,” he drawls.

Harry imagines what will happen if Umbridge dares station an auror in Snape’s rooms and snorts. They’d resign in self-preservation, that is, if they even made it past his personal wards alive.

“She still has her job, then?”

“For now,” Snape says, laced with dark amusement.

“I messaged Luna. It might be in the Quibbler as soon as this morning.”

“Hmm.” Snape fixes himself another cup of tea, tapping the rim thoughtfully as it cools. “Not the most well-regarded source, and Umbridge’s actions are bound to be attributed to imaginary creatures and conspiracies which will push credulity even further.”

Harry shrugs. “The Ministry usually doesn’t give a toss about Mr Lovegood’s wild theories, but they’ll care about this one. And when they try to cover it up, they’ll give the story much more credence.”

Snape hums again, looking briefly surprised. He moves on, short of anything nasty to say, “It is no wonder how Mr Riddle knew where to start digging. He must be a legilimens.”

Harry shudders. He cannot imagine a more horrible place that Umbridge's mind. He looks to the door on reflex, but Tom doesn't come striding through. This is by far the longest Harry has managed to sneak away without him gatecrashing, but there is no chance of that now. Riddle will surely be watched too closely to sneak away.

"But I have never heard of a legilimens able to reach enough minds to paralyse an entire room – he may be the most powerful legilimens alive."

"Oh, dear," Harry tries, and hopes Snape misinterprets the shiver.

"You are not surprised." Snape's eyes narrow. "Potter!"

Harry winces.

"Just when I was thinking you are not a *complete* idiot! *This* is what you've been keeping from me?"

"Hey, I didn't know he could do *that!*" Harry protests, as if it would've had any effect on his actions. "I thought he was a regular legilimens. And I did ask for extra occlumency lessons."

Snape pinches the bridge of his nose.

"How did Umbridge know Sirius' animagus form? That's what I want to know," Harry says.

"It does not concern me if your mut is in danger."

Harry glares. He is worried, of course he is, but he warned Sirius he is compromised, and his uncle is a capable wizard. Something else is niggling at him. "How did the Ministry find out? They didn't know in October when he turned up to see me off or they would've arrested him right there."

Snape looks like he could hardly care less. "Do not change the subject."

"Fine. Speaking of Riddle – he said something to me," Harry rolls his eyes and changes the subject more subtly. "He can't kill purebloods outright because he'll lose too much support from the network of families that run the show. Is that true?"

"I suppose it depends on what he considers too much support. He could kill every single one of you without the gamemakers putting a

stop to it, but he wouldn't be very popular in the end." Snape narrows his eyes and takes a deliberate sip of tea. "When did he find the time to tell you this?"

"One of our late-night rendezvous. When we need a rest between doing dastardly things to each other," Harry says, hoping to kill the conversation.

"If you think that juvenile display is going to stop me asking questions…" Snape says dangerously.

Harry should remember he is speaking with a Slytherin. They can all spot manipulation tactics, and not everyone appreciates them as much as Tom does.

"Late-night rendezvous after we stole the blood quill," Harry says as a peace offering. Snape is in a better mood in this house than Harry has ever seen him in Hogwarts, particularly these last weeks under Umbridge's thumb. They're almost getting along, but it's a precarious thing, and rehashing the you-suicidal-sentimental-little-idiot lecture would put paid to it, so he quickly continues, "Riddle has a lot of sway in the Ministry. That was obvious at the Ball. It would've taken years of work to build it up. He wouldn't want to lose it."

"His pureblood supporters have a lot of sway," Snape corrects. "If he loses them, he loses the lot."

Harry rocks back on his chair, staring at the ceiling in thought. "I think he wants me to kill Bellatrix. Me or Ganz. We stand the best chance." Maybe the only chance, since the arena will be rigged in her favour. It could explain why Harry caught and kept his interest if Harry had a role in his plans.

"Indeed. Will the noble Harry Potter lower himself enough to do a Slytherin's dirty work, to hurt, to kill?" Snape taunts.

Harry drops the chair back to four legs to stare levelly at Snape. "I could've cast the killing curse yesterday. Even knowing what the consequences would be."

He doesn't flinch under Snape's eyes, though they seem to peel the skin off him looking for lies. Snape eventually, incredibly, inclines his head. "It is an urge Umbridge brings out in all of us from time to time."

"Those times being dawn to dusk?" Harry suggests dryly, but he

realises he is joking with Snape and experiences a burst of vertigo. He scrambles back to familiar ground, back to business. “Since Riddle and I may have the same goals, at least at the start, wouldn’t you say we are… maybe not allies, but ally-*adjacent*?”

“No.”

“In a mutual enemy of my enemy situation?”

“Wishful thinking.”

“Well, what then?” Harry says, entirely exasperated. “What do you call it when a bloke plans to keep you alive to murder his competition?”

“A pawn with an expiry date,” Snape says. “If you had any sense in your head, you’d get rid of Riddle as quickly as possible, while there are still enough champions alive to overpower him.”

Welp, they’ve circled back to the lecture anyhow. The truce is over. Harry wandlessly levitates their dishes to the sink and tries not to think about whether there will be any alliance left to return to.

The first glass gets to the sink intact, so he tries two plates at the same time. It takes a lot more concentration.

“What do you think you are doing?”

Three pieces of cutlery and a conversation is the limit, apparently, as the other fork goes clattering across the floor. Great opportunity to try a wandless cleaning charm.

“Might as well practice every minute of the day now that Umbridge can’t watch.” And now that he doesn’t have his wand, but he will worry about that later.

“You will show me the extent of it.”

“Fine,” Harry says, and makes his chair shuffle forward until it is tucked away. He supposes he has kept most of his progress with wandless magic from Snape by virtue of keeping his skill, and plausible involvement in the pranks, from the omnioculars. He has shown nothing more than shield charms and summoning spells in duels; nothing exceptional.

Snape leads the way to the ballroom, eerily familiar with the house.

Of course, he is, Harry realises after a moment of thought. He must've visited before. Harry vaguely knows Regulus and Snape are friends dating back to their school years. Regulus tends not to bring him up, because every time he does, Harry scrunches his nose, though not as much as he did when he only had Sirius as a source of information. Regulus might've… clarified a few stories. And taught Harry in a long, exhausting process, that no situation is plain black and white. Now Harry can empathise with Snape a bit and dislike him entirely on his own merit.

…

The Room can become almost anything Harry needs. It turns into a gym or an obstacle course; he can climb rock walls and trees, he can fly. It gathers all the books which have been lost over the years into an impromptu library. He has a spare wand which doesn't entirely hate him after weeks of patronus messages. The house elves provide him with food until Umbridge thinks to order them not to, and then Dobby, the master of loopholes, provides Snape with meals big enough for two.

He is free, but his friends are not.

He is alone except for Snape. Harry tells himself Snape is horrible to everyone; it is just how he talks. When Harry doesn't take it personally, Snape is easier to get along with, but by no means good company, and not around all day besides.

The uncertainty is the worst. He doesn't know what is happening, if his friends are alright, if the alliance can piece itself back together without his help, what Umbridge is up to, what new skills people have revealed, what Moody is teaching. Snape's answers get shorter and snider the more questions Harry asks.

Harry walks to the door to leave at least three times a day, heart pounding, urging him to do something. He only manages to stop by talking to Dobby until his blood cools down: Dobby will tell him if he is needed. Harry would make things worse if Umbridge catches him. She'd hurt others to punish him.

It strikes him that the Room's magic might be a way to escape the castle wards, and in a flurry of excitement he tries every variation of the request, even risking leaving the Room to reset it. It does the best it can, replicating the tunnel to Honeydukes, but he hits the castle wards part way. It gives him a fireplace and floo powder which

doesn't work, and a broken vanishing cabinet which will be impossible to fix in a matter of days. Finally, it turns into Sirius' house, but the stash of emergency portkeys is full of junk.

He wanders listlessly through the house, disturbing three years' worth of dust. He crosses into the living room and finds himself in the Burrow. There is no movement in the kitchen. The dishes and washcloth are lifeless, and the knives aren't preparing dinner because there is no one to feed. No muffled explosions from upstairs getting on Mrs Weasley's last nerve, no brooms whizzing by the windows, no stealth missions to get first taste of dessert.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

He sets the pans washing themselves and does the glasses by hand. He tells himself the Weasleys just went to fetch a pint of milk.

Is Umbridge angry enough to hurt his family? Could she do that? Could she have someone interrogate Ron, who has no occlumency protection and knows so much and is so loyal they'll have to hurt him to try to make him talk?

He wanders into next room to see if the clock can reassure him that they are safe.

There is a Christmas tree in the highest corner of the lopsided room, stretching to the ceiling and almost eating the nearest armchair. Someone has burnt a hole in the foliage and rearranged the tinsel to hide it.

A jolt, and Harry realises it is December. Late December. He hasn't thought of time in those terms since the start of semester. It has only been a countdown to the arena – months, then weeks, now days.

He calculates and recalculates until he is sure he hasn't missed it. It is Christmas eve.

He runs out the back door and into the Room of Hidden Things and sifts through piles of junk until he has extracted small treasures. A book on common threads in the mythologies of different cultures which Hermione would love; a Cannons poster from the year Ron was born; a biting teacup for Sirius; a small mountain of coins for the twins to put towards their dream; a plant pot complaining the soil is too dry for Neville; enchanted knitting needles for Mrs Weasley, a fully mechanical watch for Mr Weasley to pull apart; an iridescent raven feather quill that, judging by the constellation dancing across it,

belonged to Arcturus Black, Regulus' favourite relative. He is Sirius' favourite too, but Regulus would appreciate the family connection more.

He found a cursed hairclip which makes everyone else think the wearer is ugly that'd make Fleur laugh. She loves interesting curses.

The uglifying hairpin was by far not the only cursed object he found. There is a cloak pin he is not game to touch. After exhausting all his detection spells from seven weeks of curse-breaking training and tutelage under Snape, all he can tell is the curse is old and strong and nasty. Why it is cursed, he can't say. The pin is nothing useful or powerful or fancy, with no gold or jewels, and probably not platinum considering how long the curse has clung on. It is not old enough to be historically meaningful. It is in the shape of a snake.

Tom likes snakes.

A book would be a safer bet. Harry knows any number of things Tom would enjoy – any of the obscure topics, the rarer the better – but he has such a high baseline enthusiasm for anything interesting, it is hard to tell when anything strikes him as more meaningful. He likes puzzles. He likes dangerous things, but not if they're a danger to him. He takes threats personally, and the pin could be taken as such. He is very proud of being a Slytherin.

Harry goes with his gut.

He doesn't separate out the gifts for his fellow champions. It'd only get them in trouble with the inspections, which, when his anger burns out, just leaves him miserable. He is looking for something for Amelia when he realises he won't get a Weasley jumper this year. It will be at the Burrow – the real Burrow – waiting his safe return.

He stops cold. He goes upstairs and lies in Ron's bed and barely sleeps.

…

Harry wakes with a slightly clearer head. It is as if the past day was a dream. He doesn't want to spend Christmas alone surrounded by presents he can't give people. He puts labels on them, puts them in an old trunk, and asks Dobby to deliver them when the castle wards go down. He doesn't think about how half the gifts might not have recipients by then. He firmly closes the trunk. He can't get consumed by this – he needs to focus on training. He will not make Mrs Weasley put that jumper away unworn.

Snape walks in, curls his lip, and insists on returning to Black house. Which is probably for the best. Snape demands Harry's full attention and for a while he is too busy to dwell, but night comes and Snape leaves. Harry has a pile of books he is supposed to read which "even dim minds should be able to extract some use out of". The lonely thoughts lurking at the edges of his mind regain more and more territory, until he is staring at incomprehensible words on a page.

"Fuck that," Harry decides. He flies to Hermione's window and taps his beak against the glass until she lets him in.

Hermione is delighted to see him. She has been as anxious about him as he is about her, with the addition of worrying if Harry is managing to keep up with her study plan.

It settles something to be near her, even if she is not the picture of calm. The deadline is taking its toll; she is frantic to cram everything. Harry is happy to simply sit among the dozens of library books and read with her. He keeps one eye on the door, keeps the window open, and stays disillusioned, because there are no longer hangings between them and the door.

Hermione must be feeling better with him around, too, since Harry managed to harangue her into going to bed twenty minutes ahead of schedule.

He is on his way back to the Room when a gust of wind blows him off course and he notices another discrepancy in Gryffindor tower. Riddle's window is still open. He said it would be a week ago. Maybe it was a standing invitation.

Harry darts closer. There is a candle on the desk where Riddle is still working.

For a minute, Harry just watches the practiced movements of his quill, the shadows play across his face. He wants to smooth out the furrow between his brows.

Harry loves him. Losing him would hurt as much as losing Hermione, but the possibility of losing Hermione is something Harry can fight. Losing Tom is an inevitability he hasn't been able to ignore since Tom declared he would hunt Harry down in the arena. His time with Tom is more limited than with anyone else he cares about. As soon as they enter the arena, they will part. He wants to spend time with Tom while he still can. He wants to feel less miserable, and he has never managed to around Tom for long.

He transforms on the windowsill and hooks an arm through the window to keep from falling.

Tom turns abruptly. Harry's stomach swoops a little. It hasn't done that for a while; his animagus transformation cured him off any vestigial fear of falling.

"Harry," Tom smiles, but a degree of consternation takes over. He scrubs a hand over his face. He looks almost as stressed as Hermione. "I apologise. I'm not good company right now."

"Doesn't bother me. Do you want me to leave?"

"No." Tom goes to lean against the wall. He vanishes the glass between them so Harry can see his displeasure at the suggestion clearly. "Do you plan to sit out there all day?"

"I hadn't decided." Harry can only fit through the bars as a bird. "I could be stuck in there until I transform in front of you."

"If I only wanted your animagus form, I wouldn't need to lure you inside," Riddle says irately.

"You could push me off this ledge," Harry agrees. He's thought of a dozen ways Riddle could startle more secrets out of him, the way he got Harry's wandless reflexes.

"If I did, you'd leave. You wouldn't come back," Riddle says. "I want your presence more than I want to know all your secrets right this instant."

Harry raises an eyebrow. "This instant?"

"I'll have them all eventually," Tom warns. "I want to know everything about you. But I can savour the experience."

Harry flushes. It must be a joke. Riddle intends to kill him in a few days – that is hardly long enough to savour anything. It must be the next edition of flirty Riddle, this time moonlighting as an ornithologist keen to dissect a new species.

But Riddle really doesn't sound like he's joking. "Everything. The secrets that keep you up at night which you've never told another living soul, to the inconsequential things which would only interest me because they're part of you."

Harry looks away. The words hit different when he's spent days overwhelmed by how alone he is; they hit and lodge somewhere beneath his skin.

"I'm glad you came," Riddle continues. "I couldn't find the time to visit. Whenever I could sneak away, I had to make the most of it to organise other matters." He hesitates, looks away. "And I thought you were avoiding me because you blamed me for the fiasco with the potion."

"Blame you? What in the world for? Provoking Umbridge by delivering the torched quill?"

"For framing you."

Harry is not following. "Umbridge framed me. Or an auror who wanted to get in her good graces. But the coordination to get the ingredients and brew it and Umbridge was prepared with the chains – no, the order must've come from her."

"But you know I could've pulled it off. And that I'm not above such tactics." Tom relaxes into the wall. A few of the stress lines ease into confusion. "People have blamed me for things with less evidence than that."

"You push one annoying girl off a cliff," Harry sighs in commiseration. "Suddenly you're suspected of every misfortune to ever strike anybody."

Riddle is startled into a grin. "Allegedly. Alas! An example of an incident I was blamed for without sufficient evidence."

"Alas," Harry echoes, wry, "the pitfalls of being so sneaky that lack of evidence is your calling card. Bit of a double bind you've got yourself into."

Tom smiles so wide it gathers in the corners of his eyes. "Quite."

Harry tucks a leg up onto the ledge, out of the breeze, and refreshes his warming charm. "I suppose it's possible you framed me. You don't do things without reason, and I can't think of one but that doesn't mean it's not there. But I seriously doubt you'd do anything to help Umbridge."

"I'd do anything that furthers my goals in the long run. If the only way to succeed happened to help her, so be it, I wouldn't hurt my own

prospects out of spite."

Harry raises a dubious eyebrow.

Tom pokes him. "Don't give me that look."

"I still don't believe it was you."

"But you can't *know*."

"We hardly ever know anything for sure. People feel certain more often than they should. I'm fine being unsure. I'm used to it."

"You are baffling," Riddle declares. "You want to believe the best in others, but you are the most untrusting person I know bar Moody."

"I'm not paranoid."

"Indeed. Yet another contradiction – highly suspicious, but not paranoid of betrayal. You give people the benefit of the doubt when you know you shouldn't. You want to save everyone, to the point of lacking self-preservation. It'll get you killed in the arena. You are… hmm, naïve is not the right word, because you are aware of the risks, but you'll stick to your principles regardless." A glare clearly says he disapproves.

"Huh," Harry says. "That's your line – reckless?"

"Not what you were expecting?"

"It's a bit ironic. My dodgy survival instinct is a large part of the reason I'm interested in you."

"Some defence prodigy you are. Did you skip the lesson where the best defence is avoiding the risk entirely? Or is the tendency to leave yourself open and rely on competence to get you through a malignant side effect of being a Gryffindor?"

Harry laughs so hard he almost slips off the ledge. "Oh, shit!" Tom jolts like he was the one whose life or secrets were at risk. Harry laughs harder. "Out the way, I'm coming through. Look at me, mitigating risks."

Tom growls. He turns around, so Harry doesn't even have to disillusion himself, but there is not much space behind Tom and Harry ends up pinning himself against the wall.

Riddle is still scowling when he turns back and, oh yeah, he's very close. "It could get you killed. Everyone in this tournament has a reason to stab you in the back. You'll give people too many opportunities. I swear to Merlin, if you also believe in second chances…"

Riddle doesn't back off, so Harry settles against the window again, from the inside this time. "I promise to only give each person one opportunity."

"Twenty-three more than is sensible. Splendid." There is more bite to his sarcasm than usual. His bad moods usually don't linger once Harry gets him smiling, but this one keeps resurging.

"Are you alright?"

"Merely frustrated."

"Hmm. Plans not going the way you wanted?"

"How do you figure?"

"Umbridge is still in the school."

"Getting her removed was a long shot. Especially the way it happened." At Harry's inquisitive look, he elaborates. "I didn't want to be the one to spill the news. It would've had more weight coming from a pureblood. If Barty had presented the evidence to Rodolphus Lestrange and then *he* confronted her, well. He cursed her earlier, did you hear? Shame it didn't happen more publicly." He heaves an irritated sigh. "And – circumstances being what they were – I had to play my cards early. I didn't have all the pieces in place yet. The result was a bit more anarchy than the organised chaos I wanted."

Harry feels unaccountably guilty. Tom must have moved the timeframe to save Harry and Hermione and his own skin because he couldn't have known Harry would not tell Umbridge he was involved in the pranks.

"That's another one of my plans you've wreaked havoc upon. This is turning into a habit, Harry," Riddle sighs, aiming for exasperation, but he is relaxing too much to fully sell it. He gives up, waving it off. "Annoying, but it won't affect the outcome. It just means more work now to tie up loose ends."

What outcome? Harry's brain starts churning away. "If you're after

chaos, I suppose my disappearing act made up for the inconvenience," he probes.

Riddle brightens. "Yes, the Ministry can't cover up your absence. The rumours are going wild in the uncertainty. You're making the officials look like utter fools. It is hilarious was well as useful, so I suppose I must forgive you."

Chaos for some purpose. But if his main goal wasn't to get Umbridge sacked or murdered by Lestrange, then what was it?

Harry makes a thoughtful hum and Tom's eyes sharpen. "Go on, I want to see if you can figure it out."

Harry can't back down from a challenge like that. "The other person it'd hurt is Grindelwald," he muses, but it doesn't feel right.

"Only in the short term," Riddle confirms it isn't the answer. "She is useful to him, but the Ministry will just replace Umbridge. It is an institution, not a character. Someone should inform Dumbledore– you cannot defeat an institution by defeating villains. It is bigger than one person. You've got to cut it out at the roots, tear it all out at once."

Then, if it isn't about who it hurts, who does it benefit? Riddle obviously, somehow, but perhaps others. Harry narrows his eyes. "You're shaking the power base. There will be a vacuum, and people who are poised to take advantage will have the best chance of stepping up. If those people happen to like you and owe you for a tip off, they'd certainly send sponsors your way."

"Horror vacui. Nature abhors a vacuum," Riddle grins.

"Which will not only help you during the Games, but you'll continue to reap the rewards when you make a bid for the Minister position yourself."

The grin widens. "I love the way your mind works."

There is an odd emphasis, not quite on the right word. Harry raises his occlumency a little higher and there is the slightest snag, like a hem ensnared while passing a bush.

Riddle is not just wrapped around the shield for anything leaking out, he is in Harry's surface thoughts. Merlin, Harry didn't even notice. He closes his eyes and clears his mind.

“No, don’t!” Riddle grabs for him, like his fingers in Harry’s hair can block the walls from clamping down.

Adrenaline makes the world slow to a crawl. Harry doesn’t know if surprise brought it on or if it’s because he wants to draw this moment out as long as possible. He wonders how comprehensible his thoughts are – from Riddle’s perspective they must be moving like a snitch in a hurricane.

“Don’t shut me out,” Riddle asks, quieter. “Don’t hide from me.”

Harry raises his shields another notch. There is no resistance. Riddle could stop him. If nothing else, Snape showed Harry the power a legilimens can wield once they’re inside. And with that, Harry thinks he understands. *I want to know all of you*, he recalls. Now he has a choice. Does he mind being known?

Riddle waits. He doesn’t plead his case, doesn’t press his advantage though he could have Harry purring if he so much as twitched his fingers.

Harry narrows his eyes.

Riddle stares levelly back.

“Five minutes,” Harry says. Or until Riddle crosses a line. He was respectful of boundaries while healing Harry’s headache and in their patronus lesson. Maybe he deserves a chance. Or maybe he’s right, and Harry gives people too many opportunities to hurt him.

Tom doesn’t argue, as if he knows that’s the best offer he’s going to get – well, of course he knows, Harry thinks wryly. Bloody legilimency.

Tom snorts at that. His hand slides down until it’s warm against Harry’s neck, fingers still teasing strands of hair.

Harry’s hands find their way to Tom’s waist in a mirror of their pose at the ball, but if there’s any dancing going on this time, it’s in Harry’s head. Harry can feel him, the push and pull, gently swaying. Tom’s mind is like the tide. Harry never noticed it before, so the sensation is either a deliberate courtesy or distraction, or Tom is doing something different, or –

“It’s a combination of your occlumency and the extent of the connection,” Tom says, and then he sighs. “You used to be this open

all the time."

The tide isn't as stormy as Harry might've expected, given how agitated Tom was earlier, and it calms further as he watches. Not flat and featureless like a lake. Rather, the waves are synchronising, perhaps with Harry's own.

"Have you done this before?"

"It is not something I can do in passing."

While Harry weighs whether that means yes or no, he wonders, "Do you do this with everyone?" He feels a flare of disgust out of nowhere.

"No. I would never get so close." It isn't until Harry hears the venom in Riddle's voice that he realises the disgust might not be his own. "Most minds are hopelessly dull or actively unpleasant. I barely touch them if I can help it."

Harry does not want to examine that now. He turns is attention inward again. It is nothing like Snape's attacks, rifling through his memories, trying to direct Harry's attention. Tom just soaks into his surface thoughts. Why? Is the surface showing him what he's looking for? Harry switches topics, reciting the uses of dragon blood; highlights of the world cup between Ireland and Bulgaria; riding the cart in Gringotts.

Tom lets the thoughts come and go without interference. All he does is nudge Harry's jaw back up when he looks away.

So. Awkwardly prolonged eye contact it is.

Riddle's eyes are brown. Harry entertains himself thinking of the least-flattering similes. It'll take effort to top Ginny's 'green as a fresh pickled toad'.

Brown as the sludge in a Polyjuice potion.

Brown as one of the more frightening Bertie Bott's beans. Just as ambiguous, too – you never know if you're dealing with chocolate or earthworm or coffee or old leather boot.

Brown as the streak on the carpet after the dog has scooted along on its –

"*Harry*," Tom sighs.

Harry grins.

Riddle raises an eyebrow and Harry has a flash of premonition. *Uh oh.*

“How long have you called me Tom in your head?”

Harry flushes to the tips of his ears. What is more embarrassing is Harry doesn’t know. It crept up on him and became a habit before he knew he’d begun.

The last vestiges of Tom’s bad mood are sliding away. The tide is lighter, twisting around him more like air than water, like an echo of Harry’s amusement. But Harry is now feeling entirely embarrassed and curious, so he knows that the lingering amusement isn’t his own.

“You’re exposed, doing this, aren’t you. You can’t occlude at the same time.”

The tide flares. “Did Professor Snape teach you that? Or did you intuit it?”

“Guessed,” Harry says. He knows he’s right.

The tide is warmer. Harry’s getting a feel for it – Riddle seems impressed. Harry would never know it from his expression. This must be what it’s like to be a legilimens, having a sneak peek behind the curtain.

“Yes,” Riddle says. The tide is stirred up by excited, dangerous waves. “I see through truth and lies. I see thoughts weaving in real-time. I tap into the emotions that influence behaviour.”

Harry thinks that is supposed to frighten him, and it probably will later, but now he’s too busy thinking. “No wonder you’re so charming. You know exactly what people want to hear.”

But that can’t be all. Riddle waltzed through a ballroom of people who didn’t want to be impressed and left them starstruck. He’s not just charming, he’s persuasive.

“You get immediate feedback,” Harry muses. “All you’d have to do is talk and tweak your approach until their emotions fall in place. Then they’ll do what you want.”

Tom’s grin is wicked. “And they’ll think it was their idea all along.”

Fuck that’s dangerous. How is Harry supposed to fight on such uneven

ground? But it's not like he can back down. At that, Harry has to close his eyes to withstand the surge of the tide. It leaves him breathless. He knew Riddle had strong feelings about defiance but hadn't realised he liked it *this* much.

"Do you use legilimency in duels?" Harry dares ask, figuring he'd better wring some honest answers out of Riddle while he can. The tide flares. "You do! That's how you're always a step ahead!"

"You sneaky little shit," Riddle says, but the tide is warm.

Harry raises an eyebrow. "Leave, then."

Tom's hand clenches in his hair in denial.

"Fucking hell, Riddle," Harry says. If he were any less amazed, his mind would be completely scrambled by that tug. "It's hard enough to keep your own thoughts straight in a fight – and you decided to mind someone else's and strategize on the fly? *How?*"

"Practice." Tom's mind is bright with excitement. "I'll give you a practical demonstration soon enough."

Harry winces. The arena. He hopes he won't see Riddle in there because he can't imagine how an encounter would end with them both alive. If Harry can beat him to the cup, Riddle might hate him for ruining his plans and future, but at least Harry won't have to kill him just to survive.

A tug on his hair interrupts his runaway thoughts. "I couldn't hate you. Even if you were entirely vexing and ruined every one of my plans." Riddle's certainty is a heavy blanket. Harry manages a deep breath. "Forget the arena. Come on, a friendly spar. Best three of five. Each round could have a theme – like only household charms." Harry's attention sinks into the problem with *teeth*. Ironing charms would be nasty, polishing the floors could control the field, overpower a starching spell to paralyse. "Or only allow the use of a spell once."

"Once each or once total? So if I use a stunner you're not allowed, oh, *that'd* be a new challenge," Harry says with a far-away look. It'd take breadth of knowledge, creative use of magic, and clever strategy far more than strength and speed. Would it be better use up all the shield charms immediately since Harry is probably better than Tom at dodging? Tom's metal shield can withstand an annoying number of hits. Then what would Harry do about the spells he can't dodge? Summoning, transfiguration –

“Then you agree?”

Harry has never wanted anything more. He *aches*. “Not a chance.”

“Hmm.” The cold wash of disappointment is exactly what Harry needs to cool down.

“You don’t know what to do with that,” Harry realises, a grin slowly growing. “Tell me; how do you manipulate emotions to change a decision that isn’t driven by emotion?”

“If I knew the answer we wouldn’t be just standing here.”

That’s a swift kick to the confidence. Maybe legilimency gives Riddle a huge advantage, but Harry isn’t defenceless. Harry stops short of relaxing. It hasn’t escaped his notice that Tom could have said as much because he’s trying to lower Harry’s guard.

The tide twists in frustrated eddies in response.

Harry snickers. “Gotcha.”

The tide is still warm, still impressed and not grudgingly. “Even when you are entirely transparent, you constantly surprise me,” Tom says.

Harry grins viciously. The rush he feels is identical to the spike of adrenaline from barely dodging a sneaky jinx. Harry can’t have their duel, but this battle of wits is a good consolation. It ticks all the same boxes. Fuck it’s fun.

“How on earth were you not sorted into Slytherin? You’re more cunning and insightful than half the house combined.”

Harry draws on the memory that used to keep him up at night, that shot such fear of rejection from James and Sirius down his spine he nearly dropped the Sorting Hat. *’You could be great, you know, it’s all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that.’* It doesn’t bother him anymore. He shrugs. “Greatness didn’t appeal, so I guess I’ve got a chronic lack of ambition.”

“That would certainly disqualify you,” Riddle says. “Such a shame. The Hat was right, you have potential. But lots of people have potential; most of them never reach it.”

The tide spreads out again, languid, like a snake basking in – whatever

it is he's after. Not warmth. Tom doesn't seek affection or approval and he isn't especially interested in the desire Harry can never quash in his presence.

"Your five minutes are up," Harry says. About ten minutes ago.

The tide turns unpleasantly chilly, but it starts to withdraw.

"You are being weirdly obliging." Harry expected some pushback, either the forceful or persuasive kind. People don't like to give things up once they've got what they want. But Riddle pulls back, slower than he'd entered; maybe he's being careful, maybe he's dragging his proverbial feet. He's not happy about it, but he's complying, because it's what Harry wants. There is something to be said for that – for respect.

Chapter End Notes

> I only had time for a quick pass with the editing so no doubt it's clunky in places, but let me know what you think.

Week 8 day seven, and exam day

Chapter Summary

> Harry and Snape realise something important, Harry doesn't think the exam or scores will be important, and Tom and Harry take some important steps together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Again!” Snape says.

“If I haven’t got it by now, I’m not going to.” Harry lowers his hands. It is the last day of training. “Shouldn’t we discuss the interview process? Or how I'm supposed to attend with Umbridge lurking around?”

“It is a bit late for you to start caring about your image.”

“I’ll just tell the Ministry they can fuck right off, then.”

“It is no joking matter. I have given up too much for you to throw it all away.”

“A few weeks of your time, a few boring seminars,” which Harry is still not taking responsibility for even if Umbridge did it to disrupt his training. Snape deserved it. “You don’t get it. You didn’t give up anything in your Games.” Snape he wouldn’t have struggled against his nature as everything else demanded he become a killer.

“I sacrificed *everything*.”

Harry has had it with the quiet threats. “You went after glory. Just because you failed to get what you wanted and lost what you already had–”

“Do you imagine for a moment, that if I was mindlessly doing whatever I wanted, I would have allied with James Potter?” Snape sneers. “Who do you think started our alliance? Your infantile father who never saw the bigger picture – do you imagine he was keen to trust a slimy snake?

It is a rhetorical question, but Harry has read the old papers and he

doesn't like what Snape is implying. "My mum started–"

"Lily *detested* your father at the offset. He was a bully who picked on his classmates because his doting parents could only heap so much praise and attention on him from afar. It took me a week to convince her to put aside years of torment and be pragmatic."

"What exactly is your point, here? Fine, it was your idea. That means it was your choice to cosy up to kid who was mean to you. To be pragmatic, as you say, because you wanted to use him." And then try to kill both his parents, if Sirius is right, but Harry doesn't think he is.

"A choice! Have you paid attention to anything I've said in the last eight weeks? There is only one choice: do everything you must to survive –"

"Or not enough and die." He has listened. Often ignored, but he listened. He is still listening, and what he hears is maybe Snape didn't want to use James. Maybe Snape exploited him on paper, but when backed into a corner the lack of control made it feel more like he had to accept a lifeline from the last person in the world he wanted to thank. If Harry's only way out of a tight spot was by accepting Draco Malfoy's charity, it would chafe to say the least.

If there was any doubt, Snape makes it crystal clear. "I did what I had to. The odds were against me and Lily because a fluke of birth meant we were young, poor, and had no family backing. And there was your father with money and prestige to spare. Circumstances forced us to cling to it – to our gracious *saviour*. He was so arrogant he thought he could afford to be picky with allies. He was happy to have Lily come to him for help, but he made me *beg*." Snape's lip curls and spittle escapes as the last is less of a word than a curse.

Harry winces. This is the reason Snape still has a grudge.

"But I got his cooperation. We wove a narrative the Ministry wanted to see. All about *him*, because he must be the main character – the pureblood bad boy who just needed a bit of polish to shine. *Him*, stumbling into a doomed love triangle where two were supposed to die. His time was running out to win the girl before he lost her to death or to her old friend from an enemy house –a rival for her attention– which meant the boy must be the villain. A role I was born to play," he says, each cliché more scornful than the last. "I watched as the act turned into truth, and only pretended to interfere. She was safer if the Ministry decided she was his."

Harry corrects himself: *this* is why Snape carries enough resentment to take it out on the son of James Potter.

“It worked – the gamemakers went easy on us to keep our little romantic subplot around to entertain the audience. But then we made it to the final three, and we were no longer a subplot, but the main plot. They would expect him to be the victor, to kill us, and it would be a solemn triumph of pureblood honour over love.” Snape’s lip curls. “We planned to disappoint them. Your father would suffer a crisis of conscience and stun us in our sleep because he couldn’t bear to kill us. But the arrogant sod wanted to subvert the ending. He forgot it was a story and fancied himself the main character for real. He imagined he’d hold our hands beside the cup and come out with a grand speech which would move hearts and minds, rather than just get us all assassinated before graduation.”

Harry may have been too hasty before. Ruining the plans Snape gave up so much to set in motion, largely to James’ benefit, probably earned more ire than stealing his best friend.

Surely this is a bad as it gets. Surely this is the reason Snape still curses the name Potter. But Snape’s voice drops lower, and with mounting dread, Harry holds off on declaring that the worse of it.

“If not pureblood victory, there is only one other ending the Ministry would accept – the villain betrays them in the end, tries to steal the glory but botches the job, halfblood halfwit that he must be,” he finishes the twisted story with a flourish of his cloak, and in two steps he is looming over Harry. Harry, who said Snape didn’t give up anything. Merlin. “What *didn’t* I sacrifice?”

Their lives, Harry realises. Dignity, trust, friendship, everything but their lives.

“I am still sacrificing,” Snape tells him. His gaze goes from Harry’s eyes to his hair and his expression is abruptly furious. He swoops away, turns his back, too angry to look at him. “Do you think, when you spin a story for the whole world, you get to hang up the costume when it’s over? It is never over. I made that perfectly clear, but your *stupid* father couldn’t keep his mouth shut. He got *everything*, and he still wanted more. He had to brag about how clever he was, take all the credit for outsmarting the Ministry. He made them look like fools and they never forgot it.”

Harry’s brow furrows in confusion. “Take credit, no – he took the

blame."

"Your father was not a saint, Potter. He didn't take the fall for everyone he came across. No, he was more likely the reason they fell."

"He was loyal," Harry says. "You knew my dad. You knew he'd protect Lily with his life. It's why you picked him for your scheme, isn't it? Well, he didn't do that because he loved her. He was loyal to everyone who was on his side and that would've included you."

"Loyal! He's the reason everything fell apart. He couldn't keep one vital secret. We could have lived out the story for the rest of our lives, but I suppose Gryffindors are too noble to lie. And you imagine he took the blame – what a ridiculous notion – no one knew it was a con until he started talking."

"That's not what happened. The Ministry found out you were meeting Lily, that you weren't really enemies," Harry's heart kicks up a gear as he realises, "And if you weren't enemies, then they knew the rest of the story must've been a trick."

"Which is why we were trying to keep our friendship *secret*. We weren't daft, boy."

Harry shakes his head. "The Gamemakers knew *before* dad went public. Yaxley tried to blackmail him."

Snape looks up sharply. And – oh, Harry was wrong. He'd assumed the Ministry tried to blackmail Snape as well, but why would they when Snape didn't have anything they wanted? Snape had no idea.

"He took the blame," Harry repeats, because what he'd realised in the moment is only now sinking in, and it is unfurling more realisations along the way. "The Ministry wanted it to stay secret to save face, and they wanted dad on a leash, and would've used mum as the noose. But they didn't need you. And you started the alliance – you would've turned up dead in a ditch one day." Harry closes his eyes. "You had nothing to fall back on. But dad had family, money, reputation, blood status – he could take the hit. And he made it a big public scandal, so it'd be even worse for the Ministry's image if he suddenly disappeared."

"They didn't discover us. We were so careful," Snape says, an echo of old fear in his eyes. "No, it wasn't our fault. Your father must have given it away somehow. No one else knew we'd stayed friends after the arena."

“Of course other people knew. Dad’s friends for a start – they told him what was going on.”

“Lily told your father. He knew from the beginning. He must’ve told his friends.”

“Sirius said they discovered it on their own.”

Snape freezes. “They couldn’t have. We used wards, animagi and eavesdropping detection charms, everything. Even the rat couldn’t have followed us.”

“They had a map. It shows where everyone is in the castle. That must be how they knew. But they’re not stupid either, they kept it secret–” or they didn’t.

“*Pettigrew*,” Snape hisses.

“It was him. He got so far, so fast in the Ministry. There’s no way – he had no power, no money, no connections, except he *did* have connections. To Grindelwald’s enemies – to the survivors who fooled him. To Dumbledore.” Harry is not entirely connected to his body. His mind is numb. The words are just falling off his tongue. Pettigrew was their friend. They’d just been through hell and survived against all odds, and Pettigrew betrayed them. “He was selling information.”

“Is,” Snape says, eyes flinty and brittle. “He *is* selling information. His position in the heart of the Ministry made him valuable to the Order. Valuable enough to forgive apparent slip ups when missions went wrong. He’s been stringing us along with occasionally useful information – *expecto patronum!*”

A huge cat bounds around the room and stops in front of them. Harry recognises her down to the tuft of her tail. “Mum,” he croaks.

Snape doesn’t look at him. “Carry a message to Phoenix and Weasel: I was right, we have a rat problem.”

The lioness rubs her cheek against Snape’s shoulder, then she does the same to Harry before leaping through the wall. Snape stares at the stone where she vanished, fingers flexing around his wand.

Harry’s shoulder tingles. He wants to ask, but Snape is still dangerously stiff.

Pettigrew is a spy. A double or triple agent. He is a threat, which

means it is time to act, not stop and think about what it means for Remus and Sirius and how Harry is to tell them, or wonder if his parents died missing the traitor – Harry raises his shields and clears his mind and tries to think rationally. “Is Pettigrew Grindelwald’s or is playing both sides, trying to profit from both?”

“I do not care,” Snape says softly. “I do not care if it was an accident. I do not care if the Ministry dragged the secrets out of him on the rack. I do not care if he traded the information to save a thousand starving orphans.”

Snape turns, and Harry takes two swift steps backwards on instinct.

“Grindelwald learnt Lily and James were Order members, now I’m sure we know how. They were assassinated to send the rest of the Order a message. The Ministry could’ve picked anyone, but they picked them because they already hated your father. Pettigrew sealed their fate twice over.”

Exactly what Harry isn’t thinking about. He squeezes his eyes shut and rubs his aching forehead. His fingers catch on his scar. For a moment, it feels wet-warm-sticky. Harry jolts away as if burned.

There is no blood on his fingers.

He takes a deep breath and resists the urge to scrub away the thick wet trail before it can drip into his eyes because he remembers the salty sting and –

It is just a feeling.

He clears his mind again, but falters after a moment. He can still *feel* it. Occlumency can’t fail him now. Harry can’t afford to process this now. He needs to focus on the arena. He cannot be consumed by something that happen nine years ago, which he can’t do anything to change.

He’ll have to tell Sirius tonight. Dumbledore should, but he might not. Harry has no idea how to do it.

Another piece slots into place. “Pettigrew told the Ministry Sirius’ animagus form. When the footage of the family farewells aired; he could’ve just pointed to the mirror and said that’s the dog you’re looking for. That’s how Umbridge knew.”

Merlin, how many lives has Pettigrew ruined? How many times has he

ruined Harry's life?

James and Lily died. Remus was publicly outed as a werewolf. Sirius is on the run for his life. Four parents forced to abandon him.

He needs to clear his mind. He can't clear his mind. He needs to fly to clear his head so he can clear his mind. "I need to go."

"What? Potter, get back here! Don't you dare do anything stupid!"

Harry doesn't take his anger out on the Ministry officials or find an omniocular to shout threats into or whatever else Snape imagines, but what he does do would probably still give Snape an aneurysm.

He doesn't want to be alone. Hermione's curtains are drawn. The candles are out. She'll wake up determined to help solve his problems. Harry imagines how much darker the bags under her eyes must be by now and doesn't have it in him to disturb what little sleep she is getting.

Tom's room is also dark, but the window and curtains are open.

Harry finds himself stumbling across the floorboards before he has made up his mind to land. He catches himself against the dresser – barely – and jostles an icicle out of his hair. He blinks at it, then scrubs a hand through his stiff, windswept locks and dislodges a few more. He blinks again. He doesn't remember being that cold or out so long.

"Harry?"

Harry squints. A blob sits up among the blankets. Harry can barely make out his hair and the sharp line the moonlight makes on his jaw.

"I – I just –" he stutters. He can't make his mouth work, but he needs to – he needs to come up with the perfect words to convince Tom to let him stay.

The blob lifts a corner of the covers. Tom doesn't move to get out of bed. He's just holding it.

Harry's brain stutters. He aims himself in the general direction and doesn't really believe what's happening until he is standing beside the bed and Tom shifts to make room. He doesn't kick Harry out when he scrambles in, or bite Harry's hand when it hovers over his chest. "Can I?"

Tom seizes the arm by the elbow, grabs a handful of Harry's shirt, and hauls him on top. And immediately lets out a long string of garbled hisses and curses and death threats. " 's fucking freezing, you bastard." But the moment Harry tries to pull away, Tom's fingers turn into claws. "Don't you dare. You did this, now you have to warm me up."

Harry clings to the terrible excuse, and to Tom, with both hands. Tom rewards this compliance with a sleepy pat on the head. Harry would think he has fallen back asleep, but long fingers card through his hair, leaving it dry and warm.

The icicles were the only thing holding Harry back from hiding his face in Tom's neck. He adjusts accordingly.

"Bag of bones," Tom grumbles again and bossily arranges Harry to his liking. Harry ends up somehow closer, so it worked out to both their satisfaction. Clever Tom. Solves all sorts of problems.

Harry opens his mind. In an instant, Tom knows what Pettigrew did.

"Sucks," Tom says succinctly. "Sleep. Fix you now, fix him tomorrow."

One moment fingers are running through Harry's hair. The next, well, fingers are still in his hair, but weak light is now streaming through the windows.

Harry doesn't remember having any nightmares, but he can't muster up more than mild surprise at that. His feelings are strangely numb, almost like he cried them out. He doesn't feel phantom blood anymore. Between the duvet heavy on his back and the solid body beneath him, he feels attached to earth again. It's a bit… not bad.

"Time's it?" Harry mumbles into Tom's chest.

"About six thirty."

"Ugh." If Tom isn't out soon, the aurors will come in. Harry doesn't want to move, but the flavour of the feeling has changed through the night: he doesn't want to move because he is comfortable, not because he feels so fragile a nudge could make him fall to pieces. And he doesn't know if that'll last if he's left alone with his thoughts again.

"No rush this morning. Examinations start at ten. Then no commitments until the wand weighing ceremony tomorrow." Tom yawns, stretching out his long neck.

Harry tilts his head up. His glasses went missing at some point, but he is close enough to see Tom in a new way: ruffled hair, skewed shirt, relaxed. He is offensively handsome. If Harry hadn't gone into this with negative arousal, he'd be in serious trouble.

Tom looks far too pleased with himself, Harry decides, and immediately checks his occlumency.

"You'll fall asleep in my arms, but you still don't trust me," Tom says. He doesn't sound hurt, only curious. "Usually, I'm the last one to trust."

Harry is not going to unpack that now. Later, he might examine the implication that Tom trusts him, and what he gets out of telling Harry or lying about it. Tom's mind is wrapped around his as closely as Harry is wrapped around Tom. His shields have slipped in his sleep, but only far enough to let emotions through. Fuck it. Let them.

"You feel a bit better," Tom says.

Harry is struck by quiet amusement. It is just like Tom to observe instead of ask, where possible.

"Well, if you're sorted now, I can go fix your rat problem."

Harry blinks. He didn't expect Tom to hold to it. "How?"

"I'll send word to the right people."

Sounds like it involves leaving the bed. Harry finds he is less than enthusiastic about this plan. Unless – "Can you cast a corporeal patronus yet?"

"Hmm. Haven't tried today." Apparently feeling enough for it to be worth a shot, Tom raises a hand. His holster flies into his palm and he extracts his wand easily. He tries. It is close – there is a definite shape to it, but it ultimately collapses back into a shield. "Yes, I have to sneak out." They both sigh. "We'll catch Pettigrew. If Dumbledore's people don't get to him first."

"Dumbledore doesn't believe in punishment. The most he'd do is stop using him as a spy," Harry says darkly. That is, if Pettigrew isn't more useful for feeding the Ministry false information.

Tom traces the knobs of his spine. "He won't get away with it," he promises. "You'll have revenge."

“Justice.”

“Difference?”

“Hurting him won’t make me feel better. It’s not what I want.”

“Oh,” Tom says. There is a pause as he recalculates. “So you don’t want him to suffer before he dies?”

“No!” Harry is mildly appalled.

“He needs to die. He knows too much about you. He’s a liability,” Tom says. That wasn’t Harry’s chief objection. He’s not Bellatrix. He doesn’t enjoy hurting people, even in payback. Tom tugs his hair lightly. “If you’re not going to let me in your thoughts, I need some other form of feedback to optimise my approach. Preferably verbal.”

Harry thinks about it. “I want him stripped of his position and power. I want everyone to know the truth. I want them to know Grindelwald was involved.”

“Make Pettigrew watch as he loses everything he gained. Make him regret hurting you until the day he dies. Yes, very fitting,” Tom translates loosely. “Hmm. My contact will probably still cooperate.”

“Who?”

“Regulus Black. He should be appropriately motivated but not entirely immune to restraint.”

Pettigrew turned his back on sworn family, betrayed Sirius, oh, Regulus won’t like that. Harry will tell Sirius because he deserves to know, but Sirius can’t do anything about it. Regulus is in the same building as the rat. It’s perfect. Harry can’t send Regulus a patronus – he works odd hours and is rarely alone – but it seems Tom can message someone who can reach him discretely.

Harry goes limp with relief. It is sorted.

A satisfied hum vibrates through Tom. “You approve.”

“Mhmm. Thanks.”

Harry hasn’t felt warm in so long; it lulls him into a doze and Tom’s fidgeting doesn’t drag him out of it. Riddle never does anything so undignified as fidget in public, and he seems to make up for the urge by constantly poking and prodding people with words, but Harry has

noticed it happening more often when they're alone. Now Tom's fingers quest seemingly at random, comparing the texture of Harry's hair to his knuckles to his sleeves to the craggy skin at his elbows to his rough nails. They can get away with lying around for half an hour until the end of curfew, and they find an excuse for another quarter hour on top of that before Tom's prodding gains a bit more purpose and Harry lets him up.

…

As far as Harry is concerned, he has the next three days off. He has a pile of books and a daily workout to look forward to while Snape is caught up in official tournament business, but he makes the mistake of mentioning this to Hermione.

"Harry! It's an *exam!*"

"With Umbridge."

"And the gamemakers! It is the only chance to show them what we've been holding back."

Not this year, it isn't. Riddle will be able to pluck the details of everyone's performance right from the examiners' minds.

"Our grades aren't just based on the exam. Snape told me they consider the whole training period, and besides, it's more of an approval rating." And it should be obvious to everyone by now just who the Ministry approves of. What a waste of time. "They've already decided our scores. The line about the exams being secret to build suspense is total bull; the sessions aren't recorded so they can fudge the numbers if they want."

"Maybe they've mostly decided, but exams must count for something. At the very least they'll show how you perform under pressure. Earning a point here or there could make all the difference to your grade average."

"What would I even do that the omnioculars haven't already seen?" Harry wonders. His patronus, maybe, but he can't do it without a wand. The wand is a major limit; he can't do most impressive feats without it. Wandless magic could be impressive in of itself, except it will just be counted as evidence that he could've pulled all the pranks. Better keep that to himself as long as possible. "They've seen the duelling and they already know I'm an animagus."

“They haven’t seen your animal form.”

“Hmm.” Harry really doesn’t want to let Umbridge or Riddle know enough to set up tailored traps.

“You must be able to think of more than that. We have ten minutes. They will expect you to exert a *bit* of effort,” Hemione says. “Look, I have this schedule. I think if I include a runic element on this spell, I could make time to include magical language such as mermish.”

“That’s great, but it’s immaterial because Umbridge will go spare if she sees me,” and there’s no telling who she’ll take it out on. “I’m not going out there.”

…

“Harry!”

“Where’ve you been?”

“Was it Umbridge – did she have you locked away and tortured?”

“What do you remember? What day do you think it is?”

“Did you escape the dungeons?”

“Did you escape the *castle*?”

“Hey, hey!” Harry wins a brief silence and hurries to fill it before someone else does. “I’m fine. I was in the castle, not in the dungeons. Umbridge had no idea where I was.”

“Oh, thank Merlin.”

“Could be Polyjuice. Say something only the real Harry Potter would say.”

“Fuck off Roger, it’s me.”

“That doesn’t sound like something *only* Harry Potter would say.”

“Oi!”

“Actually, Roger, can we talk?” Harry asks. He needs to know where the alliance stands. But before he can even get a response, Harry hears a rush of footsteps and turns to face what he knew was coming, rising to the balls of his feet.

“Mr Potter!” Umbridge is incensed. She draws her wand and takes a stance several metres away. Two aurors fan out either side, so it would appear she is still clinging to some power.

The other champions clear away from Harry, out of the collateral damage zone. Harry isn’t about to complain – it’ll make running easier if it comes to it.

The last week hasn’t been kind to Umbridge. Flyaway hairs, wrinkled robes. It must be stressful to have your house of cards suddenly balanced on a knife edge. She really can’t afford for him to tilt things even more.

“If you leave me alone, I will turn up to all the events I am required to attend on time and follow the rules,” Harry says calmly. “You can try to grab me to interrogate me or punish me or make an example of me or just make yourself feel better, but I will disappear. You will not find me before the arena.”

From the corner of his eye, Harry sees Roger rapidly pale, and Cedric takes a step back.

Even Riddle didn’t blatantly lay an ultimatum at her feet. Harry is a bit curious how Umbridge will handle it. The smart thing for her chances of staying in power would be to keep up appearances for the omnioculars, but it would mean ceding ground to Harry, and with her compulsive need for control, she might not be able to countenance it.

“Failing to qualify for a score or perform an interview will dramatically affect your odds,” Umbridge tries to call his bluff.

Harry is not bluffing. “I don’t give a toss about tradition for its own sake, and I don’t see much use otherwise. You’ve already decided my grade and the sponsors have already decided what they think of me.” What he cares about now is making his life as easy as possible, and how he goes about it will depend on Umbridge. “So what’ll it be?”

“Don’t think you can trick me into returning your wand. I will not be giving it to you for the examinations.”

He shrugs. It hadn’t even occurred to him.

Umbridge narrows her eyes. “You will behave in your interview – you will not make any inflammatory remarks?”

“I’ll only answer the questions I’m given,” Harry agrees.

She visibly wrestles with it. She may be worried enough about the interviews – *live* interviews – to tip her over. “If you put one toe out of line…”

He’d better get a running start. “I understand.”

Umbridge doesn’t trust him to hold his word and escorts them to where they’ll be waiting: the teachers’ lounge. She only leaves for the adjacent classroom when the exams are due to start, and only after shooting another suspicious look around the room as if he might be contagious.

“Merlin’s balls, you made her back down,” Roger mutters, wide eyed. “Unstoppable force meets immovable object. Maybe they should take that into account for your score.”

…

Harry only gave into Hermione’s arguments because he wanted to speak with the alliance members, but that will have to wait. The teachers’ lounge is cosy – Bellatrix is *right there*.

Harry got all the exploring out the way in the first hour. By the second, the novelty has worn off and he is staring at a ceiling which looks much the same as it does elsewhere. The professors have a nice rug in here. The examiners still haven’t reached the Hogwarts students.

“I can’t believe you talked me into this. I could be reading a book. Or playing chess against myself and losing – I found this set where black plays by itself, it’s *fiendish*. Or trying to fly on two brooms at once.”

“Two brooms – what, standing?” Hermione eyes him askance. “I think it’ll do you good to get out of there for a while.”

Harry sighs. “Yeah, probably.”

“I hope your complaining means you’ve run out of things to do because you’ve figured out exactly what you’re going to show them,” Hermione raises an eyebrow.

Cedric seems to know better. Harry catches him ducking to hide a grin.

“I suppose I could mess with the Supremacists. Walk in and then strut out five seconds later and quip something about not needing ten

minutes to prove I'm capable."

"Better prepare retorts for insults about your stamina," Roger says.

Harry snorts.

Romanov returns with a puffed-up chest to gloat about his performance to the other Supremacists. Riddle manages to look politely interested but Harry would bet his Gringotts account he is off in his head doing arithmancy or something less tedious than listening.

There is no reason for Romanov to return after his session; no reason for any of them to wait around except the Ministry says they must.

At long last, after Hermione returns and spends a few minutes chattering in a post-exam haze of anxiety which manages to elevate the stress levels of the entire room, Harry's name is called. He rolls up off the floor and into the next room.

Big red numbers start counting down. He takes a moment to look at the adults in a strongly warded section. Crouch senior has taken centre stage, the lackies flocking to his power, politely jockeying for position around the new top dog. Umbridge has been jostled into a corner, but the fact she is present at all when there are no omnioculars around to necessitate keeping up appearances suggests she still holds Grindelwald's favour. She is trying to look important, nose raised like she chose to be there. For once, her clipboard is absent – she wouldn't want to be mistaken for the aides on the fringes who are tasked with the menial work of notetaking. Important and unimportant people alike are watching Harry now, but he expects the top brass will soon turn away to discuss his flaws, or the weather.

Harry scraps the vague, uninspired plan he'd concocted. He takes another moment. And another.

Crouch pointedly clears his throat, "You may begin, Mr Potter."

"Of course," Harry nods agreeably.

And he stares some more.

Nine minutes to go.

Harry watches as, one by one, confusion turns to annoyance. He tries to predict who will be slowest on the uptake. Not Umbridge – she knows *exactly* what he's doing. She's already turning purple. Crouch

frowns at her, and Harry realises she has probably bragged about fixing his recent attendance issues, about cowing him into submission.

Eight minutes. Harry decides to hold out for a little longer, just for her.

“Mr Potter –”

Harry holds up a finger, “I’m concentrating.”

He puts on a serious face and that buys him a minute of curiosity with some of them, before the frustration returns stronger than before. They suspect he’s playing with them, and they don’t appreciate being unwilling participants in his game.

The irony is delicious.

Seven minutes.

The aides look bored. Many of the big wigs have turned to their own conversations and are ignoring him, but some aren’t smart enough to figure out that the only way to win is not to play. Those are the ones Harry will enjoy winding up further.

Six minutes.

Umbridge cracks first. “Mr Potter, an inability to take things seriously will reflect very poorly on your score.”

Harry isn’t intimidated.

“I take things very seriously. Once I set my mind on something I always see it through.” He doesn’t look pointedly at the clock, but only because he might need some plausible deniability.

Umbridge’s nostrils flare and Harry nearly laughs.

Five minutes.

They forced him to sit around for hours at their beck and call. They can’t handle having the tables turned for a few minutes. A little more might push Umbridge to apoplexy.

Four minutes.

Some of them are talking about him. Words like ‘impertinent’ and ‘unqualified’ are thrown around with steadily rising volume, in case

he missed them the first time.

Three minutes.

“Are you going to show us anything today?” Crouch asks.

“Yes.”

There’s an expectant pause, before Crouch realises the futility of going back down that route. “Would you care to elaborate?” he asks dryly.

“Bit hard to describe. I’ll have to demonstrate.”

“Well?” he demands.

“It’s difficult with you all watching.” All three of them. This performance isn’t a crowd pleaser.

“Then perhaps you should try something else,” Crouch grits out.

Harry looks at the timer. Two minutes. “I still have time and I think you’ll want to see this. It’s just taking a bit longer without a wand.”

His earnest bluffing wins another minute of the examiners impatiently watching the clock.

There are forty seconds left when Umbridge decides that’s close enough. “Thank you for such a clear demonstration of your talent and temperament, Mr Potter.”

Crouch frowns at her taking charge. She grits her teeth at backs down.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Crouch asks him severely.

Merlin, the ways Harry would like to answer that question. But while he’s willing to annoy them, he doesn’t actually want them baying for his blood. “As I said, it’s better to show you.”

He twists and overpowers a lumos so much that the excess energy turns into a sharp whipcrack of sound, and then he transforms. In the blink of an eye – if every eye in the room wasn’t squeezed shut – his body turns into a tiny ball and he zips to the door. He turns back because the doorhandle isn’t going to turn itself. It takes no longer than a beat of his tiny, rapid heart, so when Harry faces the judges, he has the pleasure of watching their watering eyes snap to his new position, and then the shock registers.

“What happened? What’d he do?”

Tsk. Someone wasn’t paying attention. Shame there are no omnioculars to play that back in slow motion.

“Apparition is impossible in Hogwarts.” Crouch looks poleaxed.

“That’s not strictly true. House elves, for one, certainly can,” Harry bows and sees himself out.

There are omnioculars in the corridor and one is poised to capture what must be a truly shit-eating grin.

“Had fun?” Hermione asks, and if she sounds resigned it’s because she knows what that means.

“Loads,” Harry replies, then turns to Amelia. “It might take them a few minutes to get themselves sorted. Don’t worry, it’s not you.”

There is a poke at his occlumency shields.

Harry’s attention snaps around. The moment his eyes meet Tom’s, the strength of the probe multiplies, but the demand softens. Tom runs a hand through his own hair – a idle move to anyone else. To Harry, it’s a reminder and a request. Harry can’t tell if it’s benign or malicious until he dips his toe in, so to speak.

Harry lowers his shields slowly, poised to slam everything shut.

The tide seeps through the smallest cracks. It’s warm, burning with curiosity. *What did you do?* Harry’s eyes widen – he didn’t know that was possible. *You got them so riled up I could sense it from here.*

Harry’s lips twitch and thinks deliberately, *What did it feel like?*

Bafflement wrapped in intense irritation.

Harry grins into his lap. Hermione looks between him and Tom with raised eyebrows.

Tom pokes his shields again.

Harry raises his eyes with exasperation. *Minutes of silent staring is going to attract attention, you realise.*

Big deal. The tide twists impatiently. *What did you demonstrate?*

Patience and pettiness. Seems like something you'd appreciate.

Tom is going to find out anyway, from the gamemakers if nothing else, but there something to be said for controlling the narrative. Harry relives the memory of winding the gamemakers up in glorious detail. It's all tangled up in his impatience with this whole farce. *They waste my time, I'll waste theirs.*

Are you trying to be the first in history to get a negative score? Is Tom's incredulous response. The tide swirls lightly in amusement. It aligns perfectly with the way Harry's mind is spinning.

You reckon I could? His eyes flick to the door and he can't hold back a grin.

You're leaving something out. What shocked them?

Harry's grin turns wicked. While Tom knows the basics, Harry certainly isn't going to put the pieces together for him.

A mystery. Let me know if the judges have figured it out, would you? He says, pulling the proverbial nundu's tail.

The tide reacts appropriately. Harry enjoys the exhilarating, dangerous surge before slamming the bulwark of his shields down.

His audacity earns a heated look.

The next poke at his shields makes it clear the last few were just knocking to get his attention. The force of it rattles his *teeth*.

Harry reinforces his shields with the full weight of his concentration, but the pressure builds. It envelopes his mind, certain to hit any weak points because it's trying *all* points, all at once.

The pressure seems to overflow, pinning Harry to his chair. It's hard to breathe. Harry feels caught in the coils of a constrictor – if he exhales it squeezes and he can't breathe back in. Give any ground and it keeps it.

Snape's attacks haven't prepared him for this. Harry's heartbeat quickens. His defences are cracking, and still the pressure grows with no end in sight.

It would be easier if Harry breaks eye contact. He doesn't. He dared Tom and Harry isn't going to back down. He doesn't want to take it

back. Fear is the least of what he's feeling.

It is blindingly obvious that Tom could smash through his shields. There's no reason to slowly crank up pressure unless he wants to draw it out. To enjoy Harry's struggle; to let *Harry* enjoy the struggle.

Harry tries everything to fight him off. Distracting memories, anchoring emotions, aggressive defences. With every exhausted option the truth is unmistakable – he is at Tom's mercy. And his breathlessness might be due to excitement.

He doesn't know what Tom is going to do next. He doesn't know when. Anticipation is adding to the pressure with every moment he's forced to wait.

The force reaches the limit of what Harry's shields can take. Instead of ratcheting higher, it hesitates, teetering on that edge.

Tom knocks.

Harry drops his shields to let him in. He doesn't even think about it. But as their emotions collide and entwine, it feels less like surrender than mutually assured destruction.

Harry was already feeling too much, and Tom is *intense*. There is suddenly twice as much of everything. It ascends into white noise, too much to process, every synapse firing, overwhelming. It hits like a punch in the face. Tom's eyes snap away, and Harry's squeeze shut. That helps. It muffles the emotions, but that means Harry can tell them apart – determination, excitement, fear, desire. They're not the kind of emotions he'd be in a hurry to get rid of.

Fuck, Harry. Tom sounds winded when their eyes meet again.

Fuck, Harry agrees.

Harry heaves a shaken breath and hears the same from across the room.

The tide is a weighted blanket in his mind, and that helps too. Harry doesn't have to wonder what the hell Tom is thinking because Tom is right there. He's not thinking much at all. The stillness is calming. Even if it's because he's stunned. Slowly, the emotions drain away. The stalemate is broken, challenge over, and that releases the feelings it evoked, leaving Harry wrung out. His muscles ache like he has just had the stuffing beaten out of him in the gym. It is just as satisfying.

Hermione digs an elbow into his ribs.

Harry looks around. Amelia is gone. Everyone who's had their turn is lost in a bored stupor and the few remaining Hogwarts students are nervously preparing. If anyone noticed the staring, it didn't hold their attention for long.

"What are you doing?" Hermione whispers.

"Practicing occlumency."

Occlumency is not usually an offensive skill, Tom huffs.

Harry throws a bit of lazy amusement at him.

Hermione looks between them. "You two have the strangest flirting."

Harry splutters.

Fair, Tom says. The traitor.

…

The scores are announced at lunch. It is, in keeping with the rest of the day, needlessly drawn out. Crouch drivels on for a while, extoling the Ministry and the Games. Harry isn't listening, so he misses the moment when Crouch spells the scores into the air in rank order and grouped by grades, but the sudden volume of chatter clues him in.

Harry snorts pumpkin juice, because Tom Riddle is at the top, of course, but they've made him his own category: O*.

"O-star! What is that supposed to mean?" Hermione asks enviously.

"Overachiever?" Harry suggests. It certainly isn't meant to be complementary.

There's an outraged shriek that Harry recognises in the most primitive, prey part of his brain. Bellatrix is *pissed*. She scored Outstanding, no longer the highest mark. The Ministry want her to go off her nut at Riddle and she obliges immediately, until Romanov makes a gesture Harry can see clear across the hall; a vulgar suggestion for how Riddle got special consideration. Bellatrix turns white so fast she might faint. She is the only one in the Hall, to Harry's immense frustration, that knows exactly what sort of beast they're provoking.

It was probably too much to hope the Ministry would pull the same trick boosting Harry's grades – the alliance might rally around him again if he looked competent. He doesn't see his name in O either. At the opposite end of the board, two grades below the next worst result of Poor for Gauthier and Hennequin, in T for either Troll or perhaps Totally Screwed, is his name.

Harry bursts out laughing.

"It's not funny! Of all the officious interference – your *grades!*" Hermione pronounces with more gravity than she would introduce an actual deity. "It isn't right!"

"Could be worse. At least they're not my NEWTs."

Hermione looks like he has just kicked, cooked, and eaten her cat. Harry cackles until he is bowed over the table. He can't help it. His spine is jelly. Hermione slaps his shaking shoulders and mutters angrily about the Ministry undoing six years of her training Harry to take his marks seriously.

"I'm sorry, I'll stop!" Harry gasps between tears.

Harry doesn't stop, because when he manages to make his floppy neck cooperate enough to look up, Hermione is smiling despite herself and that sets Harry off again.

"It's just so *petty*. Like, Draco Malfoy levels of petty. Pure theatre. Those scores –" he waves an arm in vaguely the right direction, thumping his elbow on the downstroke but serotonin has made him temporarily immune to pain. "Useless for judging skill. Doesn't tell us or the sponsors or the audience anything new. They know the Ministry is determined to off me. It's just the Ministry telling me they are *very disappointed* in me."

He tapers off into hiccupping snickers. Somewhere out there, Ron and Sirius are cheering. Luna is probably making a troll hat in support. The twins are canonising him as a saint. Mrs Weasley is threatening to follow Mr Weasley into work to find somebody to have a word with. Harry must not look around to see what Snape thinks, because he'll either look like Christmas has come around again or try to strangle Harry with his eyes. Either way it'll be too funny, and he has only just gotten his breathing back under control.

"I can't feel my face." He is smiling too wide. A Troll, Merlin, they're not even trying to be subtle. He levers himself up. "Ah, I needed that."

Cedric is looking at him with concern. Harry beams at him, then checks the board and his smile widens. Exceeds Expectations with Hermione, Krum and half the Supremacists. Cedric worked hard to earn it. “Well done!” And while he’s at it, he reaches around Hermione to slap Krum on the back in congratulations too.

Fleur has done one better and gotten an Outstanding to put her on par with Bellatrix, Stoeva, and Ganz. A bit higher than he expected, and not likely to win her any friends, but might get her more respect, and good on her. Harry finds her a table over and shoots her a thumbs up. She looks taken aback, perhaps expecting resentment now they’re not as close.

“An Exceeds Expectations!” Roger says smugly. It is not entirely unjustified, considering his speciality is potions and his best subject in school was muggle studies which are simply less useful in this tournament. He shoots a superior smirk at Harry, but he is too amused by his score to be bothered.

“Reckon my test knocked me down from Dreadful?” Harry bounces a little on his seat. “Do you think I got to them that much? Maybe it’s because they haven’t figured out how I did it?”

Amelia is not as happy, though her own score is fine. “Lizzy got *EE*?” she says in a small voice. Harry finds it very hard to believe Görder is really at that level. “What’s she hiding from me?”

Unless *that’s* the point of this – discord and distrust. Now that he thinks to check, Romanov and Bronner look furious at being shown up by Fleur.

Harry narrows his eyes.

“There’s a pattern,” he mutters to Hermione, “for at least half the champions. On average they look right, but there’s something off…” If it was just some, Harry might think they had hidden talents or perform poorly under pressure, but it’s too consistent. He knows why the gamemakers docked his marks. The alliance won’t come to him for protection when it’s not clear he can pull it off, but it is *abundantly* clear how much the Ministry hates his guts. Fine, he’ll just have to win them back on his own merit, but he doesn’t understand the others. “They usually only pick on the muggleborns as a demographic, but the halfblood scores don’t look right either. What’s going on?”

“It’s a bimodal distribution,” Hermione frowns.

Harry wracks his brain, but the pieces refuse to come together. The itch of something overlooked niggles at him. “Merlin, I miss Ron.”

“Yeah,” Hermione sighs. “He’s shouting at the screen right now, isn’t he?”

“Without a doubt.”

Chapter End Notes

Me: did I just write a legilimency scene with public bondage/ breath-play vibes and they haven’t even kissed yet? Is that what just happened here??

Happy Christmas and New Year or whatever, enjoy your holidays, my gift to you is Tom and Harry sleeping together oh-so-platonically. Also some Snape arc. And aforementioned sexy legilimency. Basically 7k of our boys being mushy with a healthy dose of plot to simmer in the background. Let’s just pretend the posting schedule for this chapter on this week was not just a wild coincidence.

All I want for Christmas this year is some thought-provoking comments. I’d like to know what you like/dislike, and particularly why – I find the wide range of ways you guys interpret my work very interesting and I need something to get me through the Christmas madness. E.g. did you prefer the sleepy comfort scene or provocative one? What do you predict is going to happen next in the plot? Do you think Snape is too bitter or not bitter enough considering what he's been through?

Next chapter might be a week or two late because it still needs a bit of tweaking and I'm not sure when I'll get a spare minute in the next fortnight.

Weighing of the wands

Chapter Summary

> Time for the champions to face up to interviews and the wand weighing ceremony. Oh dear, I wonder if there is any interesting information which could come to light here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Please welcome Mr Ollivander,” Crouch says. He waits for the obligatory applause. “I am sure many of you remember him, but for our international guests, Ollivander is the preeminent wandmaker in Britain, and arguably wider Europe,” he says smugly. “He will conduct the wand weighing ceremony; a longstanding tradition to ensure your greatest asset as young witches and wizards has not been tampered with. We will proceed in the sequence that your names came out of the Goblet.”

Harry shuffles to the back of the room and gets comfortable. It involves a lot of slouching. Umbridge glares at him. She is behind Crouch, to ensure she is in the omnioculars view in an increasingly desperate attempt to stay relevant. Harry ignores her. He is still getting used to the feeling of not being the only one doing that. Crouch waves Ollivander forward as if Umbridge does not exist, forcing her to duck out of the way.

“Mademoiselle Delacour, if you please?” Ollivander says.

Fleur puts her wand in his upturned palm.

“Hmmm…” A twist of his wrist creates a stream of pink and gold sparks. Then he moves the wand for a closer look. “Nine and a half inches. Inflexible rosewood. Containing, hmm, veela hair.”

“One of my grandmother’s.”

“Yes,” Ollivander smiles. “I don’t use veela hair myself. I find it makes for rather temperamental wands, however –”

“Hem hem.”

Ollivander turns his unblinking stare. “Birch and dragon heartstring.

Eight inches. Brittle. Can I help you, Ms Umbridge?"

"If I understand correctly, this wand was custom made."

"Undoubtedly."

"That is not the usual practice, is it? Goodness me, in my day, young *witches* were chosen by their wands," Umbridge giggles. "Perhaps it's silly of me, but if a little girl was not chosen, then would that make her not enough of a witch?"

"It is quite silly of you," Ollivander tells Umbridge magnanimously. "Custom wands are common practice. Many witches and wizards receive better results out of a more personal set-up. It is very similar to heirs and heiresses inheriting ancestral wands – a common practice in many of our oldest families."

Umbridge looks like she's swallowed a fly.

"Now, if that answers your question." Mr Ollivander turns back to Fleur and Harry swears he winks. He runs a finger along the length of the wand, checking for scratches. "Nine and a half inches… Almost all wands are between nine and fourteen inches, you know. Longer wands usually only choose a person when their physique demands it, but this isn't the case with short wands – they seem to select those who are lacking in character rather than stature. I have always found that asymmetry interesting. Ah, but we do not have time for miscellaneous wand lore if there are going to be interruptions."

Harry is caught up in a coughing fit that seems to have overcome half the room. He absolutely cannot look at Umbridge or he is going to fall over. Looking anywhere but there, his eyes meet many others in the same predicament. They are not afraid to laugh at her. Not anymore. That, more than anything else, makes Harry smile.

Ollivander conjures a bunch of flowers and hands them, but not the wand, to Fleur with a smile. "It is in fine working order."

Fleur frowns. "You will not give it back?"

"I am afraid not. All wands will be returned for the first task. Now for Mr Boutin?"

The process repeats again and again. Throughout, Umbridge keeps her mouth notably shut.

Harry's head is soon swimming with woods and cores, and most baffling of all, how Ollivander can keep a straight face while he's talking about things being "firm" or "slightly bendy" while measuring them in inches. Then he feels guilty about being so easily distracted and gets that panicking feeling he reserves for when a professor announces there will be a pop quiz. His solution then, as now, is to turn to someone who is sure to be taking notes.

"Is any of this information going to be useful?" he murmurs to Hermione.

"Perhaps as useful as my tea leaves," Hermione says. "Certainly not more predictive of performance than two months of observing them training."

"Hermione Granger," Mr Ollivander calls.

She jumps guiltily, but it is just her turn.

"Ah, at last we come to my own creations," Ollivander says with much more enthusiasm. He's alone in that– most everyone else is bored by now.

"Vine and dragon heartstring. Ten and three-quarter inches. Stiff. The core came from a particularly resourceful Hebridean Black. He was something of an escape artist, so I'm told, and infamous for circumventing protections around livestock. This is not a wand that would deign to specialise in only one branch of magic." Ollivander fills the room with brilliant blue butterflies. "You have been using it well and taking excellent care of it."

Ollivander smiles and then turns his unnerving attention on Harry. He doesn't have his wand. Umbridge draws out the humiliation for a moment, digging around in her handbag like she is minding a toddler's toy.

"Mr Potter. Holly and phoenix feather – an unusual combination. Eleven inches. Nice and supple. I have been very interested to see how this wand has fared in your hands." He examines it closely. "Phoenix feather is always a little harder to predict than other cores. Dragon heartstring makes powerful wands, unicorn hair makes reliable wands, but phoenix feather… they have *potential,* and it is up to the witch or wizard to reach it. A more demanding partnership than other cores, perhaps." Ollivander casts a jet of bubbles at the ceiling. "It is in full working order."

The wandmaker looks at someone further back. For a moment it looks as if Ollivander wants to say something else, but the moment passes. Harry swaps places with Amelia. He is getting a bit sleepy.

Ollivander proclaims Amelia's wand is a particularly powerful combination of dragon heartstring and apple and that Cedric's ash and unicorn hair is from an impressive stallion which suits him. Apparently Trelawney's is one of the most flexible wands he ever made.

Everyone sits up a bit straighter when it is Bellatrix's turn.

When Ollivander touches her wand, it shoots flames from the tip. It doesn't appear to surprise or alarm him, but his inspection is perfunctory. "Walnut and dragon heartstring. Twelve and three-quarter inches. Unyielding. A difficult wand to master. It will serve you well."

Ollivander seems eager to hand it off to the officials. Or perhaps, Harry reconsiders as Ollivander brightens with excitement, he was simply keen to get to the next wand.

"Mr Riddle. Yew and phoenix feather. Thirteen and a half inches. Surprisingly flexible." Ollivander waves the wand and lightning arcs out. "Hmm, very good. The phoenix that donated your feather spends a lot of time in this very castle, you may have met him."

He inspects the wood grain. "I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr Riddle. Every single wand."

Ollivander conjures several crows which circle the room before flying out the window. Rather than hand the wand back, as he had for everyone else at this point, he hums and peers more closely. He didn't spend this long scrutinising the other wands. He's dragging this out for some reason, near buzzing with the words he's holding back.

"It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand gave another feather– just one other. Both wands sat in my shop for seventy years, and then walked out near simultaneously. Quite a coincidence, I thought at the time, but now it makes sense." Ollivander pauses again. Harry suspects he is prone to dramatics. He certainly seems to enjoy spooking prospecting first years. Harry has barely started to get a bad feeling about it when it is accelerated to full blown alarm as the wand maker's gaze singles him out, and Ollivander says, "They were both destined for great things."

Harry inhales sharply and his eyes flick to Tom. Brown eyes are already staring back intently.

“Yes, Mr Riddle, Mr Potter – you have brother wands,” Ollivander announces, bouncing with glee. Considering how excited the wandmaker is, there’s no chance that connection is not significant.

Harry tears his gaze away to look helplessly at Hermione. She shakes her head, so she doesn’t know what it means but a library trip is in their near future.

“This is unprecedented. Never in the history of the Games have brother wands encountered one another!”

“Mr Ollivander,” Crouch interrupts. “Will this connection have any impact on the Games?”

Exactly the question Harry wanted to ask in *private*. He clenches his hands in his pockets because otherwise he’s going to cast a silencing spell. He tries not to quail under the weight of the eyes on them. Everyone is staring.

“Oh, it undoubtedly will, but I’m afraid I cannot say with any precision *how*,” Ollivander answers, delighted. Just once, Harry would like to meet someone who isn’t excited by the spectacle of his life falling to pieces.

“How about in imprecise terms?” Crouch’s smile is brittle.

“Brother wands often recognise one another, although how that recognition would manifest, I scarcely know!” Ollivander beams. “This is the first documented meeting of phoenix brother wands. Unicorn hair wands – now, there are a few cases I have heard of. It is much more likely for a unicorn wand to encounter a brother by chance, as a unicorn wand can have dozens of brothers, and such wands usually refuse to duel each other. But it would be foolish to predict the behaviour of a core based on any other. Wand lore is imprecise; there are patterns, but it is more art than science. No doubt the details depend on the nature of the wands and of their wielders.”

Tom suppresses an impatient twitch.

“There is a famous instance with fraternal brothers using brother wands – serpent horn, they were – and their wands became tenfold more powerful when turned on a common enemy,” Ollivander continues blithely.

Tom goes very, very still.

Umbridge overcompensates, scribbling furiously.

Ollivander claps his hands and Umbridge jumps at the sudden sound. “Let us try something, hmm? Come, yes, come down here.” He hands them their wands back. The moment Harry touches his wand after a week without it, a surge of warmth and relief shoots up his arm and sets his hair on end. Ollivander eyes the frizzy mess happily. “Mhmm, you have a strong connection. Now, lay your wands on your palm, yes, like that.”

Harry’s world lurches sideways as his holly wand spins like a compass to point at Riddle’s yew. It is pointing back.

“Fascinating! There is certainly synergy,” Ollivander says.

Riddle moves his hand around, testing the response. Their wands spin, squaring off. He bares his teeth in a slow grin. “Would you look at that.”

Harry closes his eyes. Merlin, he wishes he’d agreed to duel. In a minute the officials are going to confiscate his wand again and he is going to enter the arena with no idea what to expect when their wands meet. And now they *will* meet. Harry can’t avoid him, can’t avoid the fight. The slim possibility of them both surviving is gone.

Fuck.

“Mr Ollivander,” Riddle says. “Would you say this is a connection between wands or between wizards?”

“What an interesting philosophical question! The wand chooses the wizard, you know, and it follows that wands with similar tastes would pick wizards with similar potential. But let us suppose Mr Potter had shopped with Gregorovitch; he would have a different wand, but he would not be a different person, and any connection between wizards, I think, would be no lesser. Then, do the wands highlight what is already there? Ah, and we have looped back to phoenix cores and potential!”

A connection between wizards. Harry has not forgotten where he woke up the other morning, and he wonders if anything they could’ve done in that bed would be more intimate than floating in one another’s thoughts. He immediately turns beet red and protests weakly, “We’re really not that similar.”

“Oh, I should imagine not! Not in any superficial way. Holly and yew! I could not believe two such different woods would take to feathers from the same bird,” Ollivander shakes his head, but it strikes a chord.

Different shapes, but connection, Harry thinks. *My rough edges happen to align with yours.*

Somehow, Tom agrees, and sends Harry a brief impression of the pretzel he turned into that night.

Harry bites his lip to avoid laughing as Ollivander continues blithely, “Both were unique pieces of wood, I assure you. And so very opinionated. These wands would be nothing less than the closest of friends or fiercest of enemies.”

Looking around, stomach sinking further, Harry wonders whether it is the possibility of him being Riddle’s friend or his enemy which is making his friends look even more alarmed.

…

Two dozen different testimonies and seven theories later, each more speculative than the last, the library candles have almost burnt to stubs.

Harry folds his arms on top of his book.

Hermione pokes him. “You’ll damage the spine.”

He obligingly closes the book, then returns his arms and his face for good measure.

“What I’m getting out of this,” he mumbles into the cover, “is that wand family reunions are too rare for anyone to figure out a pattern. The result either depends on too many factors or it’s completely random. No one really knows.”

Even Tom has been hunting through the stacks. He left hours ago carrying books to his dorm, which implies he didn’t find answers either.

“But the variety does give us some idea what to expect,” Hermione says.

“Yeah, to expect *anything*. From pacifism to an explosive estrangement. Possibly also for the reaction to change with the phase

of the moon."

"Well, if we gloss over how exactly it manifests, more often than not the result is the wands cannot effectively fight each other."

"Yeah." His stomach clenches. He feels like he wished upon a star not to be forced to duel Tom and got what he wanted in the worst way possible. Riddle can find him – they will still have to fight. Harry did not learn to swing a quarterstaff around because he wanted to bludgeon Riddle's face in. Those workouts were supposed to be fun. His stomach roils. What's a bit more nightmare fuel. "Come on, we're getting nowhere. Let's go to bed."

Harry's dorm room has changed. The bathroom door has been removed and there is an auror standing beside the desk. Harry heaves an exhausted sigh. He turns on his heel and he is out a window before the auror even reaches the stairs.

"Do you have spare pyjamas?" he says as he lands. It the invitation isn't still open, Tom had better say.

"Second draw on the left," Tom answers. He turns in his chair. "I heard from Regulus."

Harry freezes with the shirt half out. "Did he get him?"

"Not yet," he says, a furrow on his brow. "Pettigrew didn't arrive at the Ministry yesterday. But he doesn't have a regular in-office schedule. There is an event tomorrow that Regulus expects him to attend."

"Okay. Thanks for the update."

Tom's eyes track him until he heads for the shower.

When Harry returns, feet swimming in fabric since Riddle is almost as tall as Ron, he is once again absorbed in his book. Mostly.

"Did you and Hermione find anything interesting?" Tom asks.

"A few cases of wands unexplainably backfiring in new and interesting ways in Medical Mysteries. Could be unrelated or could indicate it happens more often than people realise. If it does happen often and can be more benign, then those incidents wouldn't get reported and we wouldn't know."

“Do your Weasley twins have the same core? They are a force of nature together.”

“I have no idea,” Harry says. He intends to ask Ron tomorrow. “They were certainly more effective than most people in the DA. I didn’t notice a drop off in their spellcasting on the rare occasions they were apart. And they could duel each other no problem.”

“Hmm. But practicing is not the same as fighting. Intent is key to magic,” Tom muses. “I’ll take the left side.”

“I’ve never even seen them argue.” Harry flops onto the side closer to the window than the door, as much as there are sides to a single bed.

“If they are stronger together, you should’ve noticed. In the Boot brothers’ case, the increase in power, by all accounts, was far above what could be explained by practicing together.” Tom tosses the book aside and it floats to the top of a stack as he walks to the bathroom, but he is less prepared to drop the subject. “I haven’t seen a second example of compatible cores empowering wielders. I wonder if it does not occur with all core types. Or perhaps for the Boots the effect was strengthened by the blood relation or by prolonged proximity.”

“Or brotherly love,” Harry suggests. “Dumbledore always says love is the most powerful magic.”

“He would,” Tom grumbles.

“If it is a real effect or not, just the possibility is going to freak the Ministry out. They’ll worry I’m going to corrupt you, turn you to the dark side,” he grins. If only they knew Tom was far more of a troublemaker.

Tom snorts. He, unlike Harry, doesn’t trip over his trousers leaving the bathroom. “We could steal our wands for a duel. Just to see what happens.”

Harry looks incredulous.

“We could return them before the officials know they’re gone,” Tom shrugs, “and if we get caught and have to fight our way out, at least we’ll know.”

“Maybe if we want our wands *snapped*,” Harry mutters as Tom climbs into bed.

Harry is immediately unsatisfied. It isn't impossible to fit side by side, but having one burning line of contact when Harry knows how it feels to have more is entirely unacceptable.

There is a moment where they both try to move at once, then pause, and move again, to a dance too new to have a routine. Tom leads now, as he did in their first dance, and bulldozes through any awkwardness. He rolls half onto Harry, apparently planning to give lying on top a go, but not without a stern look that informs Harry he is expected to speak up if he has any objections or suggestions for improvements. Harry considers the task seriously. He wouldn't want to get a numb arm later and have to disturb Tom. He tests a deep breath – Tom's scent fills his nose – and finds the weight is comforting rather than restricting. No changes needed there.

If Harry could change anything – anything in the world – he'd only add in the sudden and uneventful end of the Games to make it perfect. That would remove the dread he can't uproot from his gut.

"The power of love, ugh. You'd better not put on Dumbledore's rose-tinted glasses. If you call us soulmates, you will be sleeping on the floor."

"You don't have to worry about that," Harry wrinkles his nose. There was a time Ginny was hunting for her perfect match and thought to audition Harry for the role because he was practically Ron's brother already. Turns out a list of qualifications does not make a relationship work. "I don't believe in soulmates. I thought you might, though. Aren't you a fan of fate?"

"In the short term only," Riddle reminds him.

Harry grins safely where Tom can't see it. "How about the short term after two people lock eyes for the first time and their chemistry sets off an inevitable series of events, as somewhere violins play and angels sing."

"Oh, fuck off."

Harry's snickers are cut off by a yelp. He can't squirm away from pinching fingers, pinned as he is. "Watch out! I'll send us both off the edge."

"I'd push you out before that happens."

"I'd take you with me." Harry drapes an arm across Tom's back. His

eyes feel heavier than the weight on his chest. He yawns.

“I quite despise the idea that I was designed for someone, even more than I loathe the idea of being obligated to care for a person supposedly made for me. Feel like chains,” Tom says after a while.

“Mhmm,” Harry sleepily agrees. The lack of choice bothers him too. “What if you’re interested in someone else? Better ditch them, sorry, the rules say no, you have to fall in love with this other person, and they’re supposed to mean more to you than any of your family or friends because your connection is *special*. That’s creepy.”

“Creepy. How articulate.”

Harry swats at him. “Creepy and stupid. As if you can’t have a relationship with someone who isn’t perfect for you, as if failure is inevitable. And if success is inevitable, that sucks too.” Harry tries to summon words from the recesses retreating into sleep. He squeezes Tom briefly, “If this, here, was inevitable, it cheapens the choices we did make.” To love and lose or not love at all. Harry made that decision. It’s scary and stupid and he might regret it later, but it was *his* choice. *He* decided it was worth it.

“We appreciate the things we earn more than things that are just handed to us,” Tom muses. “I put a *lot* of work into this. It would have been so much easier not to.”

Harry hums around a lump in his throat. It is a bit painful to swallow. “I can’t really relate. I felt we clicked from the offset,” Harry says. Tom looks briefly confused. “Which is a credit to your acting, I guess. You were trying to be what I wanted.” He could still be doing that, Harry knows. Harry hasn’t spotted a trick for a while, which can only mean he hasn’t been lying recently or Tom found a blind spot. A distinct possibility, after the weeks he spend trying.

Confusion is replaced with realisation and then chagrin. “That wasn’t what I meant.”

“Hmm?”

Tom considers him, tracing an idle pattern on his shirt. “No, I’m not going to tell you how I meant it. You wouldn’t believe me. But I must clarify what I didn’t mean to imply.” His hand stills above Harry’s heart. “It was not a chore to be around you. Ever. I did not have to shape myself to fit you, and that is something I value. It would be easier for me to stop breathing than to avoid you.”

Relief flows up from the cold rock in Harry's stomach to lodge under the lump in his throat. He can't speak, and hugs Tom instead.

…

"Happy birthday, Tom," Hermione says.

Harry blinks in surprise.

Riddle nods, "Thank you," and carries onto the Blood Supremacists. He doesn't receive any congratulations there.

Harry eats as much as he can stomach and then they're off to prepare for the interviews with their mentors.

Harry stares at Snape. Snape stares at Harry.

The last time Harry saw him, they had a vicious argument, uncovered a spy, had at least one mental breakdown apiece, and Snape produced a patronus of Harry's dead mother. A patronus which may have revealed protective feelings towards Harry's person.

Snape glares down his long nose and wraps his cloak tighter around himself.

Harry shuffles from foot to foot. He would like to go back to believing Snape was only on his side because he hated Umbridge more than him now please.

"So. Interviews. Should be a blast."

"Indeed," Snape says. It is quite the occasion, them mutually agreeing on something for the first time; they will not touch The Incident with a ten-foot pole. "The interviewer is Rita Skeeter. She is an unrepentant snoop who spends the rest of the year making the Prophet even less reliable than Grindelwald ever could."

Aside from Skeeter, there isn't actually much new ground to cover, but Harry and Snape make sure to scour every inch of it, until they run out of time to discuss anything else. Then there is a rush to get everyone back to the dorms and dressed and down to the antechamber to the Great Hall.

"Why do girls take so much longer to get ready?" Roger wonders.

"I think it's the hair," Harry says, one eye on the door. He didn't even brush his. He can't imagine what it would take to style Hermione's.

He hopes the girls arrive soon so they can get this over with. He wants to get out of these stiff formal robes. The collar is too high and tight, cut in the fashionable style of people who like to raise their chin to better look down their nose at others. It makes Harry more uncomfortable than the ridiculous lion jaw necklace and open cut outfit from the Yule Ball. A cynical part of him wonders if that is the Ministry's aim.

Cedric looks comfortable with the formality and Roger, for the first time in weeks, is not looking over his shoulder like he's going to catch Umbridge from standing too close to Harry. Which is more than he can say for Ivankova and Görder. Roger is not smiling, but Cedric did. Then again, Cedric smiles at everyone. Harry doesn't know where they stand, and he's sick of it.

"Are you with me?"

Roger narrows his eyes. "I don't know, are we? Or do you have a better offer?" He looks over Harry's shoulder.

Harry turns, already knowing who he is going to see. "Riddle? Of course not." He is next to Bronner, Romanov and Stoeva, but a bit apart. "As if I'd ever joint the Supremacists, even if Riddle somehow convinced them to let me."

"I know you wouldn't, I'm not stupid. That's not the offer I was talking about," Roger says.

Harry blinks.

"Riddle wants power, obviously. That's why he joined their alliance," Roger says. "But he might not need them if he has you and your wand on his side."

Oh, that's what this is about. Harry crosses his arms. "I suppose that's a step up from you believing I'm a liability and just using the rest of you as a shield from the gamemakers."

"We, er, had a chat about some of the DA activities we used to get up to," Cedric says quietly.

Harry flashes him a grateful smile.

"Mhmm. So you've been holding back," Roger says.

"I only seriously duelled Snape or McGonagall."

Roger gives him a look that lets Harry know he has raised his expectations, but not much higher. Fair enough; seeing is believing, and he hasn't seen much. "And Umbridge has lost a lot of influence, so unless you've pissed of all the gamemakers as well, the arena might not be quite so set against you."

That's a generous estimate of the Ministy's capacity to forgive. Harry's training score speaks for itself. Harry doesn't correct him.

"So if you're not such a liability, what's to stop you and Riddle running off together? We know you like him – don't denying it, it's bloody obvious."

Riddle is what's stopping them. Harry pulls at his collar, but it doesn't ease the feeling of choking. "He is with the Supremacists." As if on cue, Bellatrix arrives and holds out a hand for Riddle to bow over.

"Assuming our wands would make us more powerful together – which is not a given. It's a story from centuries ago of just one pair of brothers in the whole world. Fred and George have brother wands and it didn't make them Lords. It could be a myth or completely unrelated to their wands."

"I dunno, Harry. Ollivander knows his craft," Cedric says. "And the twins are very strong wizards. Utterly brilliant together."

"Fine," Harry sighs. "*Assuming it's right*, ever since Ollivander ran his mouth the Ministry will go off their nut if we try to team up. And Riddle wants to win. He's not going to give up his cushy favoured alliance for an uphill battle against the gamemakers."

"Oh, Harry," Cedric says, voice overflowing with compassion and concern.

Harry looks away.

After a brief flash of pity, Roger does too. "Alright, so you're not going to run off into the sun–" He cuts himself off. Harry stares. "Sorry. That was – sorry."

Harry swallows and tugs at the collar again.

"But, ah, about that wand thing. He could find us anywhere," Roger says.

Harry looks up sharply. *Us*. Implying that Harry would be with them.

He's not dead set against Harry staying in the alliance. Harry can work with that.

"Hello, boys," Hermione says.

"Hermione. We were just discussing strategy," Harry greets with a smile. "Maybe it'd be better if I scout ahead."

Roger looks deeply relieved.

"Harry James Potter," Hermione hisses in a fierce whisper. "You are not suggesting we split up!"

"Temporarily! Just until I figure out how the wand connection works. If Riddle's wand can point to mine no matter the distance or even under wards, I could lead the Supremacists right to us."

"We can handle them together."

Harry agrees with her, but the risk would be worth it if it can bring the alliance back together. It won't happen without compromise. And scouting is a popular idea.

"Look, Hermione," Roger digs in his heels. "It's not good strategy for a seeker to hide among the chasers if they have a bludger tailing them."

Hermione straightens. "Forgive my lack of expertise, but are beaters not a thing? Is it not the case that if you lose the seeker, you are all but guaranteed to lose the match?"

Roger scowls. "Well quidditch isn't a perfect analogy."

Ten points to Hermione, Harry announces in Lee Jordan's voice. He pulls at the collar of his robes.

"If you do not stop crinkling that, I am going to," Tom says mildly. When Harry spins, Tom's eyes remain on his throat.

Someone should've been able to see him approach, but the group jumps. Cedric even swears. Roger takes a wary step behind Harry – another promising sign, if he is still subconsciously going to Harry for protection.

Harry's hand goes to his collar on reflex. Riddle must've used some kind of concealment or notice-me-not to sneak up on them, he thinks, but he stops thinking entirely when Tom takes another step forward. "I warned you." Tom traces a finger from under Harry's jaw, over his

Adam's apple, to the hollow of his throat. The fabric parts, stitch by stitch, and the two sides weave into a more open collar. Muscle and bone would split just as easily.

"There, is that more comfortable?" he asks with a wicked, *wicked* grin.

Harry wouldn't know. He still can't breathe.

Tom brings his other hand from Harry's waist – when did it get there – to join the other smoothing the collar out.

"Thought you said you'd wrinkle it?"

Fingers play over Harry's larynx as it vibrates. Tom smirks, "But did I say when?"

Harry swallows.

"Oh, don't let me interrupt, Davies," Riddle says without looking away. "You were just making an excellent mistake." He taps the bare skin at Harry's pulse. "Harry is the only noteworthy obstacle standing between me and the rest of you. You will make my job considerably easier if you get him out the way."

Harry is vaguely aware his friends are gaping, though none of them seem *surprised* exactly, which Harry cannot fathom, because *he* certainly didn't see this coming. He'd halfway convinced himself that Riddle was trying to isolate him from his allies, but here he is with a threat which could bring Harry back into the fold. Roger is pale. Cedric too, as he looks to Amelia and Görder helplessly; he can't protect them alone. Off to the side, Fleur and Trelawny are listening.

But *why* is he doing it?

Tom reads the bewildered look perfectly. "Perhaps I want to unwrap a present on my birthday."

Harry laughs. "Smooth."

"Thank you," Tom preens.

"Oh, my," a loud voice cuts in. It belongs to a blonde witch in bright green robes. "Isn't this *juicy?*"

Tom counts a few more rapid beats of Harry's heart before he turns, hand dropping to the small of Harry's back, to greet her with a beatific smile. "Ms Skeeter."

“A pleasure to meet you at last, Mr Riddle,” Skeeter says. She eyes the non-existent gap between him and Harry. “We have a lot to discuss. Let’s get started, shall we?”

The champions and omnioculars file into the antechamber, newly set up to be artificially intimate. The centre of the room is a brightly lit pair of armchairs and a coffee table. Around it, in groups of twos and threes but all angled toward the centre, are more sets of chairs and side tables.

“With me, Miss Delacour,” Skeeter says, and directs her to a centre chair while taking the other. “How is my lighting?” she asks one of her aides, and there is a flurry of activity to find the perfect position.

Harry decides the perfect position is beside Krum at the back of the room. If he can’t commiserate with Ron, he wants to be with someone else who will sulk about this sort of thing.

He picks the nearest glass off a table. “Firewhisky?” he asks it optimistically.

“Harry!” Hermione scolds.

Krum’s lips barely twitch before settling back into a scowl. Harry is fairly sure the glare isn’t for him. Krum is the champion he is most confident will still ally with him and Hermione. She said he stuck by her last week during Harry’s absence, undeterred by the danger.

“Butterbeer it is, then,” Harry says, and this time his glass fills itself.

Skeeter has very little interest in equal representation. Fleur’s interview lasted about five minutes and the questions were downright rude and invasive, and it turns out that was Skeeter on moderately good behaviour. The muggleborns Boutin, Garnier and Aubert get only one token question each, as if they are dead already. Skeeter steams through the interviews of the champions she is not interested in and lingers fawningly over her favourites. You’d think the Blood Supremacists were returning war heroes the way she goes on about them, except young Gauthier who basically gets a pat on the head and shuffled along with a patronising bit about being a good role model for younger children around the world. Harry wishes Skeeter would spend more time on the others. All the Supremacists just come off as parrots who’ve had many hours of media training. Not one genuine emotion between them so far, except unnerving enthusiasm from Stoeva.

Harry traces the rim of his glass and barely restrains a sigh. He wonders how Skeeter got into the castle. Does she have a way through the wards, or has she been inside the whole time? And Ollivander, for that matter. He probably didn't abandon his shop for two months.

"Mr Potter," Skeeter greets him as he settles into the interview chair. She delicately places one hand with its inch-long red claws over the other on her knee. "You've turned out to be quite the little troublemaker. Where to begin… hmm, the ending, I think, with your training score. I must say, I was shocked. We expected a lot more of you until your fatal evaluation session. Tell me, what did you do?"

Harry's lips twitch. "Oh, not much."

"Stage fright can do terrible things to one's performance. I do hope you can get a handle on it before tomorrow."

The knowledge that there is nothing she can say to make the sponsors leerier of him than they already are allows him to shrug. "I'm not shy."

"Then whatever you did, you must've bungled it?" she prompts.

"No, I think it went rather well." He is disinclined to elaborate. He has it from both Snape and Tom that the mystery is driving the officials mad.

"How mysterious," Skeeter says, and her smile swoops up sharply like her glasses. "You certainly keep us guessing. For a while, we worried you would not attend the exams at all. Mr Potter, the viewers are dying to know – where were you last week?"

Another question that sounds like it was written by Umbridge. "In the castle, of course. I've been training."

"You stormed off and you've been running and hiding ever since," she tsks. "It is a wonder you were chosen to represent Gryffindor, House of the brave."

A taunt, an obvious trap. But Harry just spent two months debating with Tom Riddle. No other conversational minefield really compares. He raises an eyebrow, demonstrably not throwing any sort of tantrum. "I followed the advice of the bravest–" Harry's eyes dart to a dark cloaked figure in a corner and he corrects himself "–one of the bravest people I know. My mum. She said when I'm angry I should walk away until I've calmed down and can act rationally instead of taking it out

on people. Because anger is never contained. It spills over from the target to make life uncomfortable for everyone, whether they're involved or not." He shrugs. "I would've returned earlier, but not everyone was raised with my mum's values. It was clear my presence was causing certain people to act irrationally."

"Do you think your parents would be proud of your behaviour?"

I'll never know because your Minister killed them. "I think so."

"And what of your new family?"

There is a sound like a spitting cat. That'd be Bellatrix. He resists the instinct to turn to keep her in his sights.

"I wouldn't call the Blacks my new family. As far as we're concerned, our ties go back to my parents' Hogwarts days."

"Oh, but the ties are a bit more knotted than that. You were blood adopted into the Black family by the current lord. Unheard of, really. You are quite the usurper. Don't you feel you cheated?"

"That implies I was aiming to get somewhere. I wasn't. I didn't set out to become the heir of a noble house, and it wasn't what Uncle Sirius was trying to do, either. He doesn't give a toss about titles, he just cares about his family."

"His family?" Skeeter says, eyes lighting up. "There has been juicy speculation about your parentage. Is there a chance your father was not James Potter or Severus Snape, but Sirius Black?"

This again, Merlin. Harry shakes his head. "No, the lack of relation was the problem. My dad and Sirius considered themselves brothers. Sirius has been my uncle and godfather since I was born. He took me in when I was seven and adopted me six years later so I couldn't be taken away from him by people with a higher blood claim." Specifically, a great aunt Yaxley née Black looking for leverage.

"Yes, right before the felon abandoned you to go on the run. Perhaps that explains how you turned out, despite being raised by the more palatable Black brother these last few years. I suppose it was too little too late," Skeeter says. "Tell me, how did Regulus feel about being shoved aside?"

"It was his idea," Harry says, because that's what Regulus has always told him to say. Presenting a united front is important.

It was sort of the opposite, actually. Regulus offered to adopt Harry so Sirius could remain his guardian. It was a solution to the blackmail which didn't involve Sirius going to Azkaban for murder, and it neatly sidestepped the whole lordship succession issue. But Sirius didn't see why he shouldn't be the one to adopt Harry. Regulus presented some arguments and Sirius got more suspicious the more reasonable Regulus sounded, which was when the shouting started. There was something about Regulus' old crowd, about them using Regulus to get to Harry, something else about Sirius never worrying about the lordship or seeing the bigger picture. The row only ended when Sirius pulled rank and adopted Harry, which pissed off the nobility who sent the aurors knocking, just as Regulus predicted. Regulus ultimately had the last word when Sirius went on the run and left him swearing under his breath at his brother about leaving him with this mess, while the mess, being the chronically curious sort of teen, eavesdropped from the floor above.

"Poor Regulus Black, forever second fiddle. Second son to his parents, not the preferred brother of his brother or the preferred guardian of his ward."

Now that Harry is older, he thinks most of Regulus' anger was frustration at Sirius for not listening and hurt by the lack of trust. But only most of it.

"Regulus can speak for himself. And so can I, so don't put words in my mouth. He isn't second anything to me. He's Regulus. He stepped up for me when no one else could. He's always there when I need him. He cares for his family and duty more than anyone I know." Even when he doesn't want to.

"Touching," Skeeter smiles plastically. "Speaking of touching… I must ask you about the little scene I witnessed with my very own eyes."

"What about it?"

"You and Mr Riddle were getting quite cosy. You have brother wands but distinctly unbrotherly feelings, I think."

Harry raises an eyebrow and wonders if a question is going to make an appearance.

"This could be your last chance for a confession. Don't you want to get your feelings off your chest?"

Oh, is that all? "No need."

Skeeter comes up short. “Well, what about us? We’re dying to hear it.”

What about you? It’s none of their business. The only people it concerns are the ones at risk of actually dying from it. And as Roger made abundantly clear, they already know.

“Are you trying to emulate your parents,” Skeeter tries another tack. “Looking to find the love of your life in the Games?”

“No,” but been there, done that. “Even if I set out with that goal, that’s not how relationships work. It’s not an achievement to unlock. He can make decisions too.”

“Well, maybe we’ll get more out of Mr Riddle later.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Harry says, amusement stretching his mouth. The idea that Skeeter thinks she’s going to control that conversation is hilarious. “Thanks, it was a pleasure, Ms Skeeter.”

“No, thank you, Mr Potter,” she says reflexively, which is a good enough dismissal for Harry. He stands and bows, leaving her mouth gaping with the next question she wanted to ask.

The rest of the Hogwarts champions stand between Skeeter and Riddle. Cedric does well, managing to charm her and no doubt bespell the audience, but she doesn’t have any tolerance for Trelawny. Trelawny asserts that her inner eye will allow her to avoid any problems, and she is keen to impart a prediction that there will be no victor in the second task. Skeeter impatiently explains that the victor is only declared in the third task, and thereafter she cuts off any mention of divination which leaves Trelawny with little else to talk about.

The Bellatrix from the Ball makes a reappearance – bright and lively and on shining behaviour, and she stays that way because Skeeter doesn’t ask what she thinks about Harry’s general existence. Bellatrix is more devout than Mazet, more enthusiastic than Stoeva, more unhinged than Romanov, and more dangerous than Bronner, but she hits all the same talking points. Bloodline superiority, honour in sacrifice, blah blah. Harry could probably recite her lines along with her.

He straightens out of a bored slouch when it is the last champion’s turn.

“Mr Riddle,” Skeeter greets. “Let me go over just some of your

accomplishments. You published an academic article on the predictive power of prophecies while studying for NEWTs and training for the Games, as Slytherin's first muggleborn champion, mind you. You broke Albus Dumbledore's records in your OWLs, although some would say the tests have gotten easier over the years. Your training scores knocked the top off the scale. You clearly have power and intelligence to spare, so tell me, how do you deal with your natural deficiencies to be on par with purebloods? Do you have time for anything but studying?"

Tom smiles. "I confess, it used to really *bug* me that some of my classmates grew up with private tutors and libraries while we in the orphanage made do with whatever charity could spare. Whenever I *overheard* them complaining about homework, all I saw was them squandering the opportunities I would happily go to *Azkaban* for. But within a few weeks in Hogwarts, I'd caught up and surpassed them. A large degree of it is natural talent, but yes, I also put in a lot of hard work. I don't know how many *beetles* I transfigured my first year," he laughs, an easy and natural sounding thing, and runs a hand through his hair which somehow conveys the perfect amount of self-depreciation.

Skeeter laughs with him and from then on, she is all smiles and flattery. Harry doesn't understand how his charm works, but it clearly does, because Riddle is off. He runs rings around whatever she planned to ask. He swiftly reframes every incident where he got into trouble as Umbridge having it out for him because he'd found the skeletons in her closet. In under five minutes he has the world convinced he is an upstanding citizen deserving maximum sympathy and possibly an Order of Merlin.

Incidentally, if Umbridge and Grindelwald managed to bury her crimes, the cat is well and truly out of the bag now.

Skeeter doesn't get anywhere close to asking Tom about Harry.

…

The champions report to the hospital wing after the interviews. Every trained mediwitch and wizard is present, each beside a curtained bed.

"Today you will receive your final screening for curses and any lingering injuries from training," Pomfrey says. There are tight, unhappy lines around her eyes and mouth. "You will also be equipped with a subdermal portkey. The portkey will activate automatically

when your heart stops beating. It will transport your body to storage, and it will be returned to your next of kin for funeral rites after the Games."

The first task is tomorrow. Harry knew that academically, but awareness of the deadline slams into him all at once.

"If you remove your portkey, your body will not be retrieved," Pomfrey continues. "I would also advise against removal as it would require open heart surgery – a procedure likely to have fatal side effects unless conducted by a trained professional."

Harry is unsurprised to see he is curse-free. Snape checks whenever he thinks Harry is being stupider than usual. So, often.

"Take off your shirt and lie back, Mr Potter. I will put you to sleep for the procedure," the mediwizard says.

"No. I'd rather be awake." They could do anything to him while he is unconscious.

"If you move, you could cause complications."

Harry is unimpressed. "Then petrify and numb my torso." And what kind of mediwizard can't fix a misstep or two?

The mediwizard shrugs. "As you wish."

Harry can't feel anything, but he can see it. His skin and ribs peal open like a flower. He has seen worse things in the healing rooms, but he won't deny there is something more viscerally unnerving knowing it is *his* body.

"Now, you might feel a bit lightheaded as I divert your blood flow." The mediwizard goes in with a tiny metallic disk floating at the tip of his wand.

"How can it stay in the heart without doing any damage?" Harry asks to keep his mind off it.

"It doesn't penetrate any cells. A sticking charm keeps it secured to the inner wall of the right atrium," the mediwizard is happy to answer.

Well and truly in there, then. Presumably so the champions can't fiddle with them. Or hitch a ride out of the arena with a fallen foe.

Harry considers what he knows of the anatomy and guesses, “Is it on the pacemaker cells?”

“The sinoatrial node, yes,” the mediwizard brightens at his interest and goes into more technical detail. Harry prods him along with the occasional question, but the whole thing takes only a few minutes. Harry is sitting up and pressing his unmarked chest before he knows it.

“Well,” says Harry. “I never want to see that again.”

The medwizard pats him on the back and calls for the next champion.

…

Usually when Harry does something stupid or dangerous, it doesn’t involve so much anticipation. He jumps in headfirst. He has never practiced waiting and it turns out he is pants at it. But there is nothing else he needs to do. He is as prepared as he is going to get. He is fit and healthy and surprisingly well rested. He has organised tactics with his mentors. He has reassured his nervous alliance members as much as he is able. He can’t talk to his family until their arranged time later tonight.

It leaves Harry restlessly wandering the corridors, running his fingers over Hogwarts’ stones. His feet carry him to the library, knowing Hermione will be there. He also knows better than to distract her, but he doesn’t think he can sit and read right now.

Krum is at the table next to hers, and on the other side of the room, is Riddle. He is surrounded by books on curses. Harry peers over his shoulder to see pages so full of equations, he initially thinks it is written in ancient runes. Upon looking closer, he realises they are spell derivations. The killing curse on one page, the heart attack curse on the other. Lovely.

“Shoo,” Tom says. “I need to concentrate, and you are very distracting.”

…

It looks like a traditional New Years Eve festival with a tasteful blend of pagan and Roman influence so as not to offend anybody important. There is a feast and a bonfire on the grounds and dancing. Everyone is dressed in simple clothes, but it’s the pureblood kind of simple, so plain silk instead of acromantula silk. The appearance of being

humble is what is important; there is no excuse to turn out shabby.

There appears to be a schedule. It feels like they are being shepherded from one thing to the next, so it is not like Harry's family celebrations at all, because New Years is a time to let loose and have fun. 19:00 – light bonfire, 19:05 – speeches and propaganda, 19:30 – toasts, 19:40 – begin feast, 20:00 – merrymaking, 20:45 – spontaneously jump over the bonfire for luck in the coming year, 21:00 – merrymaking.

23:17 – the time Harry told Sirius and Ron to tell the rest of the family to duck away from the public eye, wherever they are. They'll hide in a bathroom and spell it silent if they must. Harry can't be late. He backs into the shadows a few minutes before and flies to the Room. He wastes no time snatching the wand and casting his patronus.

"I've got a message for Sirius and Regulus, Remus and Tonks, and Mr and Mrs Weasley too," his voice shakes. He takes a breath. "Hey, it's me. I know, I know, it's late, I'll try to sleep before the task, but you know how I get before these things. I've just got to say a few things. First off – I'm doing alright. I'm not scared. Maybe not as scared as I should be. At this point, I'm just ready for it to be over. I want to see Hogwarts' corridors full of students again. I want to go back to losing most of the House points Hermione works tirelessly to earn. I want to see you at Easter. I missed everyone at Christmas. It didn't feel like Christmas without you. I'll do everything I can to not miss the next one." He wants to tell them not to worry, but they will. He wants to tell them he doesn't want his death to upend their lives; he wants to know that they'll be okay without him, but that would be unkind. "I – yeah. Goodnight. I love you."

Prongs vanishes, taking most of the light with him.

A minute later, there is a flurry of patronuses. Padfoot, Mooney with Tonk's wolf, Arthur's weasel, Molly's wolverine, and Regulus' gorilla. They all speak at once. Harry lets the words wash over him. It gives him the courage to send the next message.

"This one is for Ron, Fred and George, Ginny, Luna and Neville. Hi, guys. Schedule's going to be a bit hectic the next couple days. This might be the last message I can get out for a while. You'll have to catch me up on all the gossip after the Games. I'll do everything I can to come back to you, I promise. But if it looks like I'm not going to make it out… will you close your eyes? Could you do that for me? I need to know you won't see it. I don't want that to play in your head every night. Remember me alive." He swallows, but his throat only

feels thicker. “Remember the time we played three-a-side Quidditch at the Burrow, and I couldn’t catch the slowest, largest stand-in for a snitch I’ve ever faced because Fred and George kept pelting me with apples. Or remember when we poked Neville’s Mimbulus mimbletonia and covered the entire carriage with stinksap and Luna wondered if it was the consistency of toll bogeys and called me a subject matter expert.” He snickers wetly to himself. “Take care of each other.”

Harry swipes a hand under his eyes.

Luna’s hair arrives first and tries to nibble his nose. Then a horse, a terrier, a magpie, and Fred’s fox – or Harry supposes he should say it is Hermione’s fox. Finally, a mongoose speaks with Neville’s voice. He couldn’t manage a corporeal form the last Harry saw, he is glad to know he has been practicing.

Ron’s terrier is the last the vanish, talking long after the others. “Watch out, Harry. The Ministry showed their hand with the training scores – the halfbloods were off, even more than the muggleborns. It’s not just Umbridge. There’s something different going on this year. It’s dangerous. Keep your guard up.”

Harry frowns but he doesn’t have time right now to wonder what they’ve got against halfbloods this year. He must return before he’s missed.

Harry is hesitant in walking out of the shadows, but there is no flurry of questions asking where he’s been. It’s a busy party and drink is flowing. He can get away with avoiding the limelight a little longer. He leans against the castle stones to watch.

The officials and mentors and trainers have separated into their own groups. Most of them pat each other on the back for completing a job well done. Bronner and Romanov are making a raucous show of how unconcerned they are about tomorrow. Riddle is running rings around people. Several judges are crowded around Cedric. Krum is hiding from Skeeter. Amelia and Görder haven’t got the attention span to focus on the stuffy work function and are trying to make the flames dance with them.

Hermione is by the drinks table. When she meets his eyes, he gives a slight nod – he stashed the spare wand she prefers in a broom cupboard near the library. She’ll sneak off to send her own messages in a minute.

He’d like to let his feelings settle more, but he needs to cover for her

absence. He wades back into the fray, thanks Moody, Hopkirk, Slughorn and dozens of other trainers for their help. He accepts well wishes and hugs from McLaggen and a tipsy McGonagall. He has no idea what to do with Snape, but certainly not *that*.

Harry shuffles. “Thanks for, you know, everything.”

“Spare me,” Snape says. “And know that I will not accept this tournament as an excuse for you slacking in my class. You will catch up on the lessons from this term. I expect all homework assignments on my desk by easter. If even one is missing, I will deduct points for the lot. Is that clear?”

Harry *knew* he was keeping a tally. What a bastard. Harry smiles and the hollow in his chest fills a bit more, “Yes, sir.”

The party drags on. Harry almost trips over Trelawny at one point. “Are you alright?” He worries she has had too much to drink.

Trelawny doesn’t answer the question, but she doesn’t slur either. “We are under prophetic stars.”

“Are we?” he humours her. Harry doesn’t know much about astrology. A centaur once told him Mars is the bringer of war, right after he made the ominous announcement that it is getting brighter, but it is the wrong time of the night to observe Mars. When Harry looks up, the first thing he sees are three constellations; the same ones he watched rise with Tom in the Room of Requirement weeks ago – Draco, Hercules, and Serpens.

Somehow, he doubts it means they’ll encounter a pompous Malfoy in the near future. “I don’t suppose they’re telling you we’re going to face dragons for the first task?”

“The stars do not concern themselves with small matters,” she says haughtily. “They reflect events which will change the world.”

That’s good; Harry doesn’t have a pressing urge to see a dragon up close. But then Trelawny glares at him.

“Besides, I already *told* you you’ll face something with the power of a hurricane and fatal breath. There are not many things it could be *but* a dragon.”

“Wait, you did?”

“Ages ago,” she insists. “No one ever listens to me.”

“Er,” Harry can’t refute that. And he is a bit caught up on *dragons*, and whether to even believe her. If she’d seen them lined up in cages beside Hagrid’s hut, sure, but tea leaves or smoke rings don’t evoke the same confidence. Or provide much useful intelligence at all. Without knowing the species or when he is going to encounter it or if he needs to do anything except escape it, the warning is not much more use than the two months he spent thinking up strategies to deal with every possible creature.

He sits by Trelawny a while longer. Dumbledore checks on her eventually, but by then Harry’s attention has drifted from the stars to Tom, watching him effortlessly turn himself into the focus of the party. It is fascinating. And it reminds him of the Ball, of how they started. With that on his mind, tomorrow doesn’t seem as close.

Their eyes meet and hold across the crowd. Tom knocks on his occlumency shields. He does not look pleased. Harry lets him in with trepidation. He immediately senses Tom’s wariness and mistrust of the headmaster quietly talking to Trelawny beside him.

I’m sorry, there’s no easy way to say it – Pettigrew got away.

Harry’s mind is white noise. His fingers go numb. But two memories are yanked to the surface – *Harry lying on Tom, face hidden in his neck, fingers in his hair – Tom’s weight pressing him into the mattress, “I did not have to shape myself to fit you”, waking in the night with an aching shin to see Tom still asleep on his chest, pinching himself to stay awake to remember more of this moment* – and then with a twist he is – *under Harry with icicles melting on his pillow, body wrapped around body and mind wrapped around mind as Harry practically collapses, demons are waiting in the wings but he pushes them aside before it can get a foothold in his dreams, let him rest, and he is lying on Harry but awake enough to appreciate it properly this time, this time or every time and still never be enough times, squeeze him tight, he doesn’t want to let go.*

Harry can practically feel it. He is both Harry and Tom, hugging and being hugged, in their dark room in Gryffindor tower where the world can’t watch, *warm-safe-mine*.

Harry blinks and presses the feelings back. Slowly, Tom lets the memories slip away. The feelings remain. Harry adds gratitude to the mix.

What happened?

Dumbledore's people confronted the rat in his home, tried to make a deal. He fled to Grindelwald's shadow. Arthur Weasley tried to intercept him and almost ended up in St Mungo's. There is a flash of annoyance, then anger honed to a vengeful edge. *It's not over. He's on guard but still within Regulus's reach. Soon, Harry.*

Harry has just enough time to send more thanks before Tom is dragged back into conversation. He appreciates that Tom told him the first chance he got instead of trying to manage him, but on the other hand, not snapping at Dumbledore while he is right there is going to be tricky. Tom trusts him to handle it. Good memories are easy to access, right at the surface of his mind. He wraps himself in the hugs and cinches his occlumency down tight.

Dumbledore has noticed his distraction, and the direction of his gaze. "He is incredibly charming, your young man."

Harry is still annoyed, so he says, "Yours too." He doesn't meet his eyes. "Have you spoken to Professor Snape today? I heard someone say one of his colleagues almost ended up in St Mungo's. Does he know?"

Dumbledore goes from mildly surprised by the turn of the conversation to downright alarmed.

"I – no, I don't believe so." He can't ask about Harry's source while there are people listening. Harry revels in his frustration just a bit.

"He deserves to know."

"He does," Dumbledore agrees slowly. "But the timing, you understand. He is trying to focus on the tournament, on you. He may regret the distraction later."

Harry narrows his eyes. That right there – he is grateful Tom didn't do exactly that.

He smiles with a few too many teeth. "But the mentor duties are over. Don't worry about me. You should tell him. Tonight."

If Harry can't yell at Dumbledore, he wants to know that someone is.

Dumbledore is silent for a long moment. "I will."

Harry's hackles lower somewhat. "What kind of accident was it?"

“Ah, he was investigating an old recipe to determine the function of a volatile ingredient. There are always contingencies in place when doing such work, of course, but nothing is foolproof.”

“Right, plans can only get you so far. That’s why the accident surprised me. I don’t know much about potions, but I know potions masters build an intuition for these things after so much experience with the ingredients,” Harry narrows his eyes and continues mildly. “I wish I had that. Then I could just trust intuition and I wouldn’t ruin so many potions by adding the next ingredient too late because I was busy double checking the instructions.”

Dumbledore lowers his head. “You are right.”

Harry hums and grabs a drink from a floating tray. Still not firewhisky. Damn. He taps a finger on the glass and sips the disappointing pumpkin juice.

Digging into Dumbledore’s weak spots didn’t make Harry feel better. Dumbledore owning up to his mistakes did, a bit. But what helps most is knowing that Dumbledore will confess it all to Snape: that he didn’t take Snape at his word, he had someone check Pettigrew’s loyalties, which tipped him off. Snape is not going to hold back. He will not have to dance around with potions analogies and code. Harry doesn’t want Dumbledore to brush this mistake off as a mere setback, and no one is better at making someone appreciate the full magnitude and detail of their mistakes than Severus Snape.

Harry catches Tom glancing his way again, checking in. Harry raises his glass in an ironic cheers. He gets one back – a congratulations, perhaps, for not blowing his top. It makes him smile. He buries the last of his irritation under the layer of warmth.

“Did you love him?” Harry asks. He could die tomorrow, so he might as well. “In the arena, I mean.”

“No. Love came after,” Dumbledore says quietly. Harry had imagined so; Dumbledore was twelve at the time. “He was the only one who understood what I’d been through.”

“I’m afraid of that. Of – after,” Harry confesses.

“It is hard,” Dumbledore says. “The Games take you from your regular life and change you into a new shape and do not warn you how hard it will be afterwards to fit back in. Sometimes, when two people go through an ordeal together, the pressure reforges them as two parts of

a whole. But other times, people just click from the offset. It is a beautiful and rare gift, to find a person whose rough edges align with yours." He suddenly looks his age. "In any other circumstances, I would be delighted for you, but when events transpire to make it impossible to keep – to have it and then lose it so soon… I am truly sorry, my boy. I hoped to save you the pain."

"It's alright, Professor."

"Is it, really?" This might be the most surprised Dumbledore has looked yet.

Harry hesitates. He nods. It won't kill him to lose Tom. It'll gut him. He might never fully recover, he'll count it among his scars, perhaps beside a lost limb or nerve damage or a permanent curse. Because some things, you don't fully recover from. The best you can do is carry on, and Harry knows he can manage that much if he has his family supporting him. He just wishes he didn't have to.

"Did you tackle that trouble that came your way, with a resolute heart and cheerful? Or hide your face from the light of day, with a craven soul and fearful?" Dumbledore says.

"Sorry, what?"

"Poetry, my boy. Only poetry." A wizened but still strong hand pats him on the shoulder. "And this old man's contemplations on bravery. Death comes for us all; it is the universal human experience. How you choose to live your life – that is what matters, and that is where some people stand out."

Chapter End Notes

> Song for this chapter: 'And so it goes' by Billy Joel. It explains very well how Harry feels about Tom at the moment.
>
> Happy New Year and thanks for all the comments, I really appreciated them and I'm still working on replying. It's been a good year. I can't believe I managed to get this much done since last February. I'm going to drop back to monthly chapters until my PhD is finished, but my thesis is due in July and I'm writing three papers at once while still analysing data, so we'll see how long that lasts.
>
> I also used up most of my buffer since I've been posting long chapters. My editing process is more like a re-order and re-writing

process (which is why this beast keeps getting longer), so I can only manage to edit about 2k a week, while I've been posting 7k a fortnight since chapter 20. Maths is not my field but I can say with 95% confidence that is unsustainable. I was relying on having a few weeks off in January to catch up, but I ended up having too much to do.

I have the first task is mostly proofread, which doesn't give me as much as you'd think because the first task isn't very long. The second task is the long and complicated one. The second task was also in dire need of a re-write since I did it before I wrote the whole training section, let alone re-wrote the training section, and now Tom and Harry are a lot further along in their relationship than I originally planned. (I have a cascading re-write problem. Happens every time.) Anyway, I'm halfway through editing the second task but I should probably finish writing all of it before I start posting any of it. We'll see.

The first task

Chapter Summary

First half of the first task.

Chapter Notes

Check out the utter beast of a relationship web I made for you guys: https://archiveofourown.org/works/54010258

I have a huge spreadsheet which I use to keep track of everything and I've decided to share some of the less spoilery bits. This web shows who are friends/allies/enemies at this point in time for pretty much all the characters. It shows full names, blood status, gender and age. I know that can be hard to keep track of with 24 champions, particularly the minor ones we've barely seen for the last 100k words. It is not necessary to check out, if you want to skip it, the important info is in the main story. It's for the curious.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first day of January is cold. It is cold outside, where the grey skies touch the windows; in Harry's chest, when he remembers this is the last morning; in the room, when he gets out of Tom's bed because he has to, because no magic in the world can freeze them in this moment forever. They are out of time, out of tricks.

Harry layers up before heading down the breakfast, but the chill has set its claws deep in his bones. He feels stiff and slow. It takes him a minute to process when Hermione says, quiet and stilted, "Are you okay?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, I'm fine."

She looks unconvinced.

"Weird dreams, is all. Not nightmares, not about – you know. Just a bit surreal."

"How surreal?"

"The first task was a broom race against a dragon."

Hermione manages a smile. "You'd almost enjoy that."

“I blame Trelawney for putting it in my head. She said I’ll face one in the arena.”

Hermione sees through him, “I wouldn’t stress overmuch about it. Divination is a wishy-washy subject.”

“That sounds suspiciously like something McGonagall would say.” It could be a quote, in fact.

“I had a dream too,” Trelawney says as she arrives.

Harry does a double take. She has roughly the same complexion as the Bloody Baron. “Are you–?”

“I need to speak with you. It’s important,” she interrupts. She catches his raised eyebrow, glances at the omnioculars and the Supremacists and turns a shade whiter and whispers, “There’s a prophecy.”

Hermione doesn’t scoff. She might’ve, except she knows there is a real prophecy out there that Snape wouldn’t let Dumbledore tell Harry. There’s more going on, and maybe Trelawney is just making it up, but maybe she is picking up on something bigger.

Harry leans forward. “A prophecy?”

“Not here. And not now. I want to make a deal.”

“Yeah?” Harry says warily.

“I’ll tell you about the prophecy if you help me get through the first task.” Her voice shakes. Harry wonders if it is the prophecy or the task that has her spooked. If she’s not just making it up to get his help.

“You could’ve just asked,” Harry says. They’re not formally allied anymore, but she must know he wouldn’t turn her away.

“Don’t forget to focus on your own performance, Harry, not only helping everyone else,” Hermione frowns.

Crouch Senior taps his wand on his goblet for attention. He is in the centre chair, Umbridge nowhere to be seen. “All champions will follow me to the first task.”

Hermione hurriedly stuffs a few more snacks into her robes. Harry stands beside her, Krum slots in on her other side, and they file out of the Great Hall surrounded by what must be every auror in the castle. For the first time in weeks, the huge front doors open for them. Krum

sighs faintly in relief.

No one speaks as they walk towards the quidditch pitch. They crest the hill and light glints off something new – a massive bubble fills the pitch, as high as the hoops and brushing the stands on all sides.

There are festive Ministry banners and flag but no life, no cheering, but the stands are not empty. Harry spots Dumbledore first in eyewatering fuchsia robes. In front of him are McGonagall and Snape, and even Madam Maxime sitting head and shoulders above the rest. McGonagall is speaking while Snape stares straight ahead, tilting his chin in the barest nod or shake. Harry gives a cheery wave just to earn a glare for old time's sake.

Crouch stops at the base of the stairs up to the stands, "Welcome to the first task. It is a solitary test of daring and improvisation." He points to the tunnel the teams use to enter the pitch. "Vital supplies are located past these doors. You will each have up to ten minutes to remove supplies to use in the remaining tasks. However, a magical creature will be in there with you."

Harry lets out a slow breath. They've held to the tradition by kicking off with an individual task. He doesn't have to fight Riddle. Not yet.

Crouch withdraws a satin pouch from his belt. "There are twenty-four possible creatures in ranked difficulty, which we will assign by drawing lots." Crouch offers the pouch to the nearest champion, the young Supremacist Gauthier, and he withdraws a slip of parchment. It flashes blue and the number 7 appears on the back of his robes. Crouch holds the bag to the next champion with an impatient little shake. "Lots one to fifteen are class four-X creatures, and lots sixteen to twenty-four are class five-X creatures. Now, to make things fair, those facing five-X creatures will be told which creature they will face and have time to plan. For everyone facing four-X creatures, it will be a surprise."

Harry draws a piece of parchment, turns it over, and sees a bold 23. Then it is gone and a tingle of magic behind him makes his neck prickle. He skims a mental list of five-X creatures and finds his gaze settling on Trelawney. He clenches his fist, banishing the damning parchment to wherever it is vanished items go.

"Please line up in order of your number."

Riddle steps up beside Harry, a deadly black 24 branded into his robes. What was it Riddle said? If the Ministry realise he is stronger

than Bellatrix they'll set up a beastly accident halfway through the tournament.

"Well," Harry says, "That happened sooner than you expected."

"Indeed." He sounds mildly put out.

Harry looks the other way and freezes. Oh, shit. Oh, *fuck*. He checks her back, hoping she got turned around – surely that's the explanation, she's only a second year – but no, her robes say she has to face the third most dangerous beast alone.

"Hello, Görder," he manages to get out past the lump in his throat. He tries on a brittle smile.

"Harry," she croaks out.

He raises an arm; she leaps on the offer, tucking into his side. For the first time in weeks, she is more afraid of something than the Ministry going after her for associating with Harry. She's trembling. Harry feels like shaking to pieces himself, but she needs him to be strong.

"Hey, it could be good you're up here," Harry says. It is not good. "Mr Crouch will tell us what beast you've got, and we can work out your strategy in advance."

He scans the rest of the line over her head. Hermione, Cedric and Roger are about halfway long near Bellatrix. Amelia is at the far end. It isn't random. All of Umbridge's undesirables have ended up with five-X creatures. Except – no. Umbridge isn't here. He hasn't seen her since the interviews. Crouch isn't even letting her linger in the background anymore. She doesn't have the influence to pull strings.

Unless all this time he's had it *backwards*. The Ministry aren't targeting them because Umbridge dislikes them; Umbridge disliked them because the Ministry was already set against them, for some reason.

Crouch steps up to the first of the worst. "Number sixteen, ah, Mr Penchev, you will face a lethifold," Crouch says. "Miss Trelawney, your creature is an acromantula. Miss Ganz, a wampus. Mr Bronner, you'll face a manticore. Mr Hennequin, a chimaera. Miss Delacour, you have a nundu."

Harry's eyes get steadily wider as Crouch works down the line, because *holy shit*, they are not messing around.

“Miss Görder, you must best a quintaped,” Crouch says and Harry’s heart stops. A beast so dangerous, the government made their island unplottable and barricaded them in to stop them spreading. “And Mr Potter, a dragon.”

Harry nods absently, more put off that Trelawney was *right*, and then by the unusual pattern. Aside from Poulin, that’s every halfblood champion. They’ve thrown in Bronner and Hennequin, some of the less favoured purebloods, to make up the numbers and add some plausible deniability. And next is Riddle; the only muggleborn, and the only one Umbridge didn’t take an immediate disliking to. Immediately disdain, yes, but he had to earn her ire fair and square.

Ron was right. They’re targeting halfbloods. Why?

“Last but certainly not least! Mr Riddle, the creature guarding your supplies is a basilisk.”

Harry meets Riddle’s eyes and sees furious understanding. They are not supposed to survive. Riddle has to fight something he can’t even look in the eye without dying, but if he hangs on long enough to get a rooster to crow, he should be fine. Harry might not be. Dragons don’t have big, glaring weaknesses. They have big, glaring *everything else*.

“Mr Boutin, as our first contestant you will remain here. All other champions may proceed to the viewing area,” Crouch says. He turns to Hennequin, who hasn’t moved and might be hyperventilating.

“I can’t fight a chimera!”

“You can, of course, choose not to face it,” Crouch says. “However, you will forfeit your supplies. Keep in mind that the first thing beyond that door is your wand. If you enter, the gate will lock for nine minutes unless you press your bag of supplies to the door, which will act as a key.”

Harry glares. That isn’t a choice. Abandoning their wands means almost certain death. At a minimum, they’ll have to enter the arena to collect their wand and try to stay alive for nine minutes. But he supposes it’ll lighten the consciences of the people enjoying this spectacle to believe that the champions die due to their own mistakes and choices.

Görder’s clinging makes it difficult to climb the stairs but Harry can’t resent it. She transfers to Amelia and Cedric, waiting at the top for them, too shaken even to cry. She won’t be ready to talk strategy until

the Hufflepuffs calm her down.

“She was right,” Hermione says, perturbed. She is looking at Trelawney and Delacour, heads bent together in conference.

“I guess so,” he says.

“What else was she right about?”

Harry shakes his head helplessly. He hadn’t really listened.

Hermione’s expression twists from worried to determined. “Do you have any idea what you’re going to do?”

“Some.” More ideas about what he definitely shouldn’t do. Dragons did come up in his strategy meetings with Snape and McGonagall. Regardless of the species, their senses are too good to be fooled by disillusionment. They’re immune to most spells and resistant to the rest, only vulnerable on their unscaled surfaces around their eyes, mouth, wings, and sometimes under their limbs.

Hermione rifles through her pockets and pulls out a blood pudding from breakfast.

“Hands,” she demands, and places it in his upturned palms.

“What?”

“Cup them, yes, like you’re holding water.” Harry can only follow her instructions and hope he’ll catch on eventually. “Amelia, come here!”

Hermione mutters a spell and the food liquifies. The blood floats to the top. She dips her finger in and starts writing protective runes on Amelia’s robes.

“Oh, clever.”

Crouch’s voice rings out loudly. “Mr Boutin, step up to the gate. It will open in three, two, one.”

The small boy takes shaking steps into the unknown.

The Quidditch pitch is no longer grass, instead set out in three concentric rings. The outermost ring has trees on one half and craggy rocks on the other, then there is a moat, and in the centre, there is a small island – flat, bare, no cover. On the island is a backpack. It looks unguarded. It’s obviously not.

“Where’s the creature, do you reckon? Forest or water?” Cedric asks.

“I can’t see anything,” Roger says.

“Forest,” Trelawney answers.

Roger looks unconvinced. Hermione, less so.

In the arena, Boutin is hesitating; he doesn’t know either. “*Accio backpack!*”

It doesn’t move and the Blood Supremacists snicker. Harry thinks it’d be stupider not to try and then find out later that it was possible.

Then there’s a flash of movement and Boutin spins to face the forest, clutching his arm. He fires a spell that illuminates what looks like an evil house elf.

“Erkling,” Hermione says. “It must’ve hit him with a poison dart.”

Bellatrix scoffs. “What an easy creature. And people accuse the Games of favouring purebloods!”

“If they didn’t give mudbloods a handicap there wouldn’t be any left by the second task,” Stoeva says.

Boutin easily stuns the creature, crosses the moat, and returns with the backpack.

The dome blacks out while the creatures are swapped over. Amelia won’t get any warning. Harry hugs her and wishes her good luck before she heads downstairs. He anxiously scans the area as soon as the bubble turns clear and hopes she spots the ripples in the water. She does. She correctly identifies the kappa and remembers how to appease it by conjuring a cucumber, which is a spell at least three years ahead of her age. Her sealion animagus form easily lets her cross the moat and return with her backpack.

“You were brilliant, Amelia,” Cedric says. “Show us what you’ve got.”

That catches the attention of the rest of the champions. Harry, too, would like to know whether the bag is worth risking his life for.

Amelia opens it. It’s a lot bigger on the inside. She sticks her whole torso in to rummage around. “There’s a bunch of salves and potions. Oh, and a cauldron and a lot of tools and ingredients. A bunch of blank rune stones and a chisel set. A map of the forest. A tent. And

clothes." She pulls out a jacket made of some kind of hide – armour.

Damn. So the bag is worth it.

Hermione reaches for Krum's robes next. His turn is fast approaching, but Krum shakes his head.

"You first," Krum says. "I am only number eight which should not be difficult. I will be grateful for your protections if there is blood left over."

Hermione frowns thoughtfully and calls Görder over to cover her in blessings for luck, speed and stealth. It's just a nudge, but it might be the nudge that makes the difference. It's not the best quality though – the animal was sacrificed for food, not protection – and there isn't enough material to do everything Hermione would like.

"I could donate my blood," Harry says.

"No. You're going to need it in you," she says grimly.

Below them, Krum's housemate Ivankova tries to retrieve her bag by levitating a rock with a sticking charm. Clever, but it doesn't work. The rock appears to hit an imperturbable barrier. When there is still no sign of her creature, Ivankova decides to rush the island. She conjures a bridge to stay well clear of the water. Harry didn't know she was capable of that level of transfiguration.

An invisible creature ambushes her on her way back. The bag goes flying. Ivankova rolls to her feet, a nasty gash on her side. She casts a detection spell that coats an apelike shape in red mist, but spotting the target doesn't help Ivankova hit it – the creature preternaturally contorts around her spells.

"It's a Hidebehind," Hermione is the first to identify it. She turns back to her rune work.

Ivankova shoots fire at it, grabs the bag and runs.

Garnier is fourth. She enters, grabs her wand, and pauses.

"Another invisible creature perhaps?" Cedric says. A moment later, a cloud of dust kicked up with no clear cause confirms it. Garnier fires a detection spell, but the creature is long gone. "Damn, this one is *fast*."

"Don't just stand there," Harry mutters. "Lay more dust or fling some

paint or make some mist."

Garnier casts a shield. Not a bad idea, but a bit front heavy, considering she doesn't know where the threat will come from. She's unsettled.

Her mentor is on his feet shouting. Harry picks out one word between the French: tebo. A type of African boar. Garnier doesn't notice; there must be spells blocking sound and sight from inside.

It slams into her shield like a battering ram with a furious squeal. Beside Fleur, Aubert screams. Trelawney has her hands over her eyes. Garnier goes flying, lands hard on her side, winded. She managed to hold onto her wand.

"Come on, get up!"

Garnier recasts her protego. The boar hits it again but doesn't let up this time – the shield flashes three times before it shatters. Teeth sink into her leg, and it whips her around like a ragdoll.

"*Stupefy!*"

"Did she hit it?"

The spell bounced off something – the better question is how well did it work? Was it startled, dazed, or knocked out? Tebo have thick hide. But the hit was enough to release her. Garnier scoots away, breathing heavily, and gets to a knee. She conjures a splint for the other one, shakily gets to her feet and limps forward. She conjures a raft, slumps onto it while it carries her across, and almost falls into her bag looking for a healing potion.

Harry checks the clock. There isn't much time left.

Garnier is halfway back when the tebo hits her from behind. She isn't braced for it, isn't shielded. She crashes face first into the dirt and barely rolls over before it's on her again.

Harry can see two tusks now, lined with her blood.

"*Avada kedavra!*" dazed, she misses.

The boar squeals, bites the outstretched arm and shakes it.

"*Relashio!*" Garnier manages, but not before there is a crack. She whimpers. "*Protego!*"

The wand movement is shaky. The boar rams through the weak shield, hits her hard enough to flip her over.

The ten-minute bell sounds. There is a flash of a portkey above Garnier and the boar vanishes.

“Return to the gate, Miss Garnier, you have forfeited your supplies,” Crouch says as a matter of course. She is unconscious. Harry catalogues the injuries he can see; she might make it if she got a blood replenisher and a suite of spells to fix the damage, but there is no one to help her. Crouch knows. “Miss Aubert, get ready.”

Aubert doesn’t hear him. She is hanging over the railing crying for her friend.

A minute later, another flash, and then Garnier is just gone. Dead. Sixteen years old and her story ends. Harry takes a shuddering breath. Hermione is holding his wrist so tightly it’ll bruise. They were born on the same month.

Trelawney stumbles over, even paler than she was this morning. “Harry – help me? Can you help? I don’t – don’t want to –”

“Yeah, sit,” Harry says, and Hermione grimly adds protections to her robes. Stupefy and impedimenta would be the go-to spells but they’d need to be overpowered to have a chance against a full-grown acromantula. He hasn’t seen Trelawney cast anything nearly strong enough. “Do you know the spell for repelling spiders?”

Trelawney shakes her head.

Harry strangles a pulse of worry and frustration. She spent most of the training time looking into the future, yet she is still unprepared for when it inevitably rolls around. “Arania exumai. The movement is a flick, swirl, flick. Expelliarmus or relashio will make it drop you if it grabs you. Aim for the weak points for stronger effect – belly, leg joints, eyes.”

The bloodstain is still there when Aubert enters the pitch. Already white as a sheet, she sways and Harry worries she might pass out, but movement catches her attention, and she raises her wand.

Serpentine loops breach the lake in a way that is distinctly–

“Sea serpent?” Amelia says, tucked into Cedric’s arms. “But they’re peaceful.”

A large head breaks the surface. It looks at Aubert but doesn't attack.

Harry's uneasy feeling grows. His instincts are screaming trap.

"It can't be," Hermione frowns. "They're only classified as three-X creatures."

"Some other kind of serpent, maybe horned? They swim," Roger says.

Fleur rolls her eyes, "Oui, and they, you know, *have horns*."

The pieces of the mystery slot into place and Harry's eyes widen. "Hermione, remember they thought the Loch Ness monster was a sea serpent, but it was actually–"

"A kelpie!"

"A sneaky one," Riddle agrees, eyes intent on the arena. "I don't think Aubert has realised. She should've bridled it by now."

Aubert casts a dozen freezing spells. The lake is soon covered by a thick layer of ice, trapping the creature beneath.

"Shit. That won't work," Harry braces on the railing and grips it until his fingers ache. "It's a demon. Water is its domain. Ice is still water–"

A neat circle of ice abruptly melts beneath Aubert's feet, and she drops into the deepest part of the moat. She shrieks, catching her elbows on the edge of the hole, head and shoulders above the freezing water. Then something yanks on her legs – she disappears.

Frothing water spills out of the hole onto the frosted white surface as they struggle, spreading like spilt ink as the ice turns transparent wherever it touches. There's nothing but black below.

For a long minute, Harry waits for her to surface.

Then the water falls still.

The champions shuffle restlessly. Hermione rubs Harry's clenched fists.

It takes a long time to drown when you're counting every second. After an age, a bright flash illuminates the ice and the shadow of a giant horse.

"Portkey," Harry hangs his head and lets out his breath.

“Another mudblood bites the dust,” Romanov quips.

Harry rounds on him, furious.

Cedric is closer. He grabs the Durmstrang boy by the throat and slams him against the section wall. Strength must be one of the traits carried over from his animagus from because Cedric is holding him clear off the floor.

“If you want to make it into the arena, I suggest you shut your mouth,” Cedric says quietly. Harry is starting to see why he got the scariest animal out of anyone in the DA. The resemblance to a bear is uncanny even without the shift.

Romanov shoves Cedric’s arm and his eyes widen when the hold doesn’t budge. The biggest bully is not used to feeling weak. He tries to reply but all he can get out is a gasp.

Bronner starts forward but doesn’t get far before Roger and Harry block the way. Hermione and Krum are poised to intercept the rest of the Supremacists, but none of them look inclined to step in. Protection isn’t their style. A Supremacists has to be able to hold their own.

“Isn’t it part of your dogma that it’s an honour to die in the Games? Show some respect,” Cedric says and then he lets Romanov drop like a sack of potatoes.

Crouch clears his throat, unimpressed. Harry braces for punishment but Crouch appears largely disinterested in anything except the disruptions to the schedule.

Crouch shoos Romanov out of the way. “It is not your turn. Miss Stoeva, please.”

Stoeva faces a snallygaster. It’s like a dragon, but missing the claws and the fire and at least seven tonnes. It is also very easily distracted. Stoeva sends the beast running in the wrong direction after a loudly protesting sheep. When it loses interest in the sheep, then a conjured disco ball, and focuses on the witch, Stoeva blasts it out the sky with an accurate shot at the feathered half. Harry wants to swap creatures.

Then it is Gauthier against an erumpent. He quickly loses the cocky strut he’s had in his step around the corridors with Bellatrix on his side. Here, he is just a fourth year running for his life. He only survives because he is quick and the erumpent can’t turn on a dime. Gauthier dodges the wild charges and makes it to the island by

turning into a penguin. The erumpent follows him, wading into the water, which soon bubbles and steams. He can't swim back. He dodges several more charges when he tries to cool the water, succeeds a little too well and makes it across the moat by sliding along on his belly.

By the time the bell sounds and the erumpent disappears, the pitch is littered with craters. Gauthier sullenly hands over the bag he'd worked so hard for. Crouch stops him, "Your wand too, Mr Gauthier."

Gauthier pales. "No, but–"

"You get to keep materials which past the gate before the ten-minute mark. You should be grateful you get to keep your life."

"Remind me again why the bag is worth it?" Harry mutters.

"I'm going to set a timer spell first thing," Hermione says. "Are you going to go for it?"

"Might as well. I won't be much safer hiding by the gate." The time limit isn't such a risk for him; he can ditch the bag and fly for the exit in a second. "And I've got a few options I could try."

Harry wouldn't say he has a plan, exactly. Strategy, sure, or vague goals. He'll disable the dragon's weapons if he can: fire, wings, claws, in that order. He has at least six contingencies for each. He'll pick from his many options when he sees what species he's up against, because the ideal plan for a Chinese fireball won't do much against a Ukrainian ironbelly. The uncertainty doesn't worry him. He knows from previous practice getting into reckless fights than he can think fast enough to finetune a plan in the moment. And if he does run out of ideas or luck, he'll resort to his animagus form. There is even a good chance the champions won't be able to see it; Harry knows how hard it is to spot a snitch across the pitch.

The gate opens for Krum. His creature isn't a subtle one – the griffin screeches a challenge at him. Krum doesn't look concerned. He fires a featherlight charm at the backpack, managing to hit it on the first try even at such a distance. Then he starts running and by the third step he's spread his wings and he's airborne.

The falcon makes a beeline for the backpack. He barely alters his course to manoeuvre around the griffin, rolling around a snap of that giant beak and ducking around the tail like the creature is standing still. The griffin looks clumsy and sluggish in comparison – it's still turning around when Krum swoops over the backpack, talons

extended.

The griffin doesn't stand a chance of catching up, even with the extra drag of the bag. Krum transforms in mid-air and lands on his feet without even breaking his stride, wand in hand and backpack over a shoulder.

"That's one of the smoothest things I've ever seen," Harry says, clapping Krum on the back, which is the only part of him Harry can see with Hermione smothering Krum in her hair. When she releases him, he emerges back into the light blinking. Harry knows the feeling.

"Thirty seconds," Cedric whistles. "Were you aiming for a record, mate?"

Krum just shrugs.

Hermione gasps when the dome turns transparent, revealing the next creature. "Centaurs are sentient beings!"

Poulin yelps and scrambles for his wand. The arrow only misses him because it was a warning shot.

"No closer!" the centaur orders.

Poulin looks between the centaur and the exit, weighing his options. Harry thinks he chooses wrong, with more ambition than skill. Poulin fires off disarming and stunning spells. The centaur ducks the first and bats the other aside – the bow must be enchanted – but ropes tangle his hooves.

Poulin makes a break for the bag, but the centaur kicks free and runs him down in a few strides. He hoists Poulin up by his collar, takes his wand and snaps it. He glares at the omnioculars. "I do not exist for your entertainment, wizards! Release me or the foal dies."

Harry seriously questions which species is the most beastly because that reasoning will never work with these people.

Just when Harry is bracing himself to see Poulin's neck snap as easily as his wand did, the man seems to get even lankier and a second later he is a snake, sinking his fangs into the centaur's wrist.

The centaur flings him away. The snake lands with a splash in the moat and doesn't stop moving until he is curled behind the bag, while the centaur rages, slows, and falls to his knees. Only then does Poulin

return to his human form and swim back. He makes it to the door out of breath and shaking, with seconds to spare.

The centaur is not moving when the dome turns dark.

Hermione is furious. “More innocent lives wasted.”

Roger is next up, against a nesting occamy. She swells up until she spans the pitch from side to side and is large enough to swallow him whole. There is not much Roger can do get around her without flying; he is blocked by coils at every turn. He tries to bait her into a small container, but she isn’t afraid, she’s angry. After nine minutes and barely any progress, he rather sensibly takes his wand and dives for the exit.

Roger won’t meet their eyes.

Cedric slaps him on the back. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“You did well not to get eaten,” Harry assures him.

Mazet gets off easy with a graphorn. They’re ranked so highly because they’re endangered and anyone encountering them should take care not to kill them. She stuns it and strolls through the task.

The dominant run for the Supremacists is set to continue. Bellatrix’s Cerberus looks terrifying and impressive, if you haven’t been desensitised. To Harry, nothing will compare to rounding Hagrid’s hut as a first year and coming face to many-faces with the playmate for Fang which Hagrid definitely wasn’t supposed to keep on school grounds.

Hermione rolls her eyes. “Of course, she’d get a creature that any informed first year could get past.”

But Bellatrix doesn’t start singing or conjure an instrument. “*Avada kedavra!*”

Green light hits the centre head. It shouldn’t work. The Cerberus is huge and magic resistant. Bellatrix shouldn’t be able to muster enough power to stun it, but the Cerberus falls with a ground-shaking thud.

Harry gapes. As terrifying as she is, he has still, somehow, underestimated her. Lesson learned: the unhinged behaviour which makes her seem a bit ridiculous is disarming. Behaviour precisely like skipping over to kiss the Cerberus on the nose.

A familiar hand settles on the small of Harry's back. It is something Riddle has done a hundred times to announce his presence, but this time – cold, cold, cold – Harry flinches.

Riddle pauses. He lifts his hand. He abandons whatever he was planning to say, scanning Harry's face for clues. "Umbridge's rules for public contact don't apply any longer," he guesses.

"I remember." Harry didn't cringe because he was expecting punishment.

The hand, hovering above Harry's back, moves further to settle on the railing. Harry's shoulders loosen a little. Riddle's draw tighter together. "It can't be because we're rivals or we're broadcasting live or we're in front of your friends." None of those have stopped Harry before.

Harry can't give him a clear explanation. It shouldn't feel different. He rolled out of Riddle's bed no problem, and nothing has changed yet; they don't have to fight each other for this task – but it *does* feel different. The touch is taunting him with something he can't have anymore, and Harry knows that's not how Riddle means it, but it doesn't change the feeling.

"I've made you uncomfortable." Riddle's frown deepens. His hands flex on the railing. They are where Harry can see them. He wonders if that's deliberate and with a look at Riddle's face decides, yeah, it probably is. Harry's heart swells with fondness until it presses against the cold cage of his ribs.

"I don't know." Maybe, if Harry's occlumency wasn't locked down tight, Riddle could make more sense of his thoughts than Harry is able to. Maybe he could've spotted the new line before he tripped over it. Or maybe not – Harry certainly didn't realise he would have a problem with touch until just now. "Not *that* uncomfortable." It's not like Riddle is trying to yank the line back to where it was before. "It's alright."

"No, it isn't," Riddle says. "What's wrong?"

Harry is expecting the light tap tap tap of legilimency, but the familiar caress suddenly feels like a skittering spider checking its web. He throws it off with a shudder and scrubs a hand through his hair to erase the feeling.

Something like pain flashes briefly across Riddle's face. He doesn't try

again. Warier now, he scans Harry from head to toe. His eyes linger on the places where Harry is carrying tension: hands, shoulders, neck, the lines on his face.

“You’re not angry with me,” Riddle observes.

There is a question in there. Harry doesn’t like how unsettled Riddle looks trying to find the answer, so he nods and tells him, “You haven’t done anything.”

As far as Harry knows, anyway. There is nothing in Riddle’s manner which is setting him on edge. Harry turns his awareness inward instead, to find he isn’t more afraid of Riddle than usual and his admiration is still burning strong. No changes there either.

“What did you think of Bellatrix’s performance?” Harry asks. If Harry is wrong, and Riddle doesn’t want Harry to kill her, he might be evasive or lie. But it is a test for himself, for his new boundaries, more than Riddle.

“Bella is powerful,” Riddle says, tone purely professional. He chances a knowing look, “More powerful than she appears.”

Harry hums. “That’s what I thought. It’s not just an affinity for the Unforgiveable.”

“Yes, not only. Though her mindset does give her an edge with those spells,” Riddle says, relaxing considerably when Harry replied without baulking.

The ground feels steadier beneath Harry, too. It is disconcerting for Riddle’s presence to rub him the wrong way. Even when Riddle hexed him and threatened to hold him captive in the Room, Harry felt more excitement than dread; he’d itched to rise to the challenge. Now all Harry wants to do is fly away as far and fast as he can. But he can still manage conversation, if not proximity or legilimency, and that is familiar.

Harry watches as Bellatrix freezes the moat, going for the brute force solution again. He hums. He has seen enough of her training to know she’s got more up her sleeves, but it is useful to know her inclination when faced with a real problem is to whack it. That can backfire in certain circumstances. Harry will have to ensure she runs into them.

Bellatrix finishes with the second fastest time. Impressive, considering Krum is the fastest animal on the planet.

“Tom, you weren’t waiting for me at the gate!”

Riddle turns to take in the full force of her pout. He is unmoved, his smile a charming but perfunctory one. “I would not have been able to watch your marvellous performance from there.”

“Oh, please, it was over in ten seconds. You didn’t need to watch me walk back.”

“Ah, but I had to keep my eyes on you until the end. One never knows what you’re going to do. You keep us guessing.”

“Aww, you’re sweet,” she bats her eyes. Her gaze darts between Riddle and Harry, and it appears they do not provide the reaction she was after. She skips forwards, arms outstretched, but runs up short into Riddle’s hand.

“Must we go over this again, Bella?”

She shoots a poisonous glare at Harry. “But you let *him* touch you. And not even just on your arms.”

“Permission for one is not permission for all,” Riddle says, an edge of warning rising through the undercurrents in his voice. “And I am not something you can lick to mark your territory.”

“You’re so funny, Tom,” she giggles. She doesn’t dare come closer, but sidling sideways appears fair game. She plants herself squarely between them.

Riddle rolls his eyes. He offers his hand with an impatient twitch of fingers which is redundant because Bellatrix takes it immediately. He draws her closer, and the smug look she shoots over her shoulder is short-lived when he keeps pulling her through the coveted spot between his arms and neatly deposits her on his other side.

Chapter End Notes

> Brain: here’s a great idea, do the first task in ranked difficulty so the intensity ramps up and gets worse and worse.
> Impulse: yeah, let’s do that and let’s write 13k words so we have to split it down the middle.
> Brain: so all the slower stuff is - wait I see a problem.
> Impulse: oops too late.
> I picked a hell of a time to drop back to monthly updates. I’ll try to get the second half out early because it really is meant to be

read straight through. I guess in the meantime you can just wonder what Tom is going to do about the basilisk.

There's always a bigger snake

Chapter Summary

The first task ramps up to the finale.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A transfigured cow runs one way and Cedric runs the other. The left and right heads of the runespoor attempt to do the same. The middle head dithers, like it'd disagree with the left head on principle, except the cow is just so juicy and Cedric isn't big enough for all three to share. The huge snake darts after the cow in a blur, most of its mind made up. The right head is looking backwards at Cedric, whining forlornly.

Riddle quickly turns to smother a snort in his own shoulder.

Not being able to watch the runespoor and Riddle at the same time seems to cause Bellatrix physical pain. She is buzzing, her head on a swivel. Harry isn't sure why she is so excited when Cedric isn't in imminent danger of being eaten. He has reached the backpack with time to spare. The runespoor is safely occupied on the other side of the pitch, coiled around a cow that won't die with increasing confusion.

Bellatrix's excitement can't just be because she's a Slytherin and the runespoor is a giant fuck-off snake, can it? But she is hanging off the only other Slytherin like she is trying to share a religious experience.

Harry keeps one eye on Cedric until he is safely out. The other stays on the threats beside him. His shoulders loosen in relief when they don't follow him when he crosses the viewing area to hug Hermione and wish her good luck.

Even before the dome clears, there are dull, ground-rattling thuds from something big and angry. Harry clenches the railing and uselessly strains his eyes for a glimpse of the creature. He *hates* this.

Krum nudges him. "She is strong."

"I know."

“She is smart.”

“Extremely.”

Krum waits.

Harry hangs his head. “I just wish I could be in there with her. She’s always there for me.”

The dome clears and Harry bites his lip. It’s a mountain troll, even bigger than the one their demon-possessed defence professor set loose in the castle for shits and giggles. The gamemakers must’ve heard the rumours – must know Hermione was paralysed by fear and almost died. If any monster features in her nightmares, it’d be this one. But she has faced a lot since first year, and even back then, her bogart was an amalgamation of failure and letting people down and rejection, not a monster.

The troll has stopped raging at its sudden change in surroundings; now slowly turning and scratching its head. The gates creak open and catch the troll’s attention. A swing of its club smashes a boulder into the wards in a shower of dust. Hermione doesn’t waste any time – she dives for her wand and blasts the next rock away.

Harry grits his teeth. It’ll only take one mistake and she will be crushed.

Trolls are dumb and their sense of smell and hearing are barely above human standard. Hermione disillusions herself and muffles her footsteps. It has no idea where she is. The troll throws a tantrum, whacking rocks with its club and sending them scattering in all directions. It doesn’t seem to notice the rocks bouncing away from an invisible shield.

Harry takes a deep breath. Hermione has kept a cool head. She can do this. His heart aches in sympathy for Ron and Fred, forced to watch, safe and sound. It’s only been one minute and he doesn’t know if he can bear another.

The club suddenly stops mid-swing. The troll makes a puzzled sound and grabs for it, but it floats just out of reach. The troll jumps, falls short, and scratches its head.

On the island, the backpack turns invisible.

The club drops a little lower and darts back out of reach when the

troll jumps again. It spins and the troll stares, transfixed. Harry is, absurdly, reminded of Hermione dangling a feather for Crookshanks. The club floats away and the troll charges after it, arms outstretched.

Hermione returns with the backpack and not a scratch, vibrating with unused adrenaline. Harry is also itching for something he can *do*.

“Trelawney, come over here. Görder, you too,” Harry calls.

Görder and Amelia pop out from behind Cedric.

Harry eyes Görder as objectively as he can – she is shaking less than before. The shock of the announcement has had time to sink in, she isn’t going to get any calmer until it’s over. He’ll just have to repeat himself if she can’t focus.

Trelawney is in slightly better shape. Delacour follows her over. Harry welcomes her input; they’ve been talking strategy and Harry doesn’t want to confuse Trelawney with incompatible options.

“Did you see that? How Hermione hid from the troll’s senses?”

Görder nods.

“It worked because trolls rely on their eyesight and hearing. Your acromantula and quintaped will also have good eyesight. You could try a blinding spell. They can’t see in infrared, either, so a disillusionment spell will work against them, unlike someone’s hungry runespoor,” Harry elbows Cedric and the kids manage a grin. “But there is another sense you have to keep in mind – their legs are very sensitive to vibrations. They’ll be able to feel you running around.”

“That is another reason to keep off the ground,” Delacour says. Then, to Harry, “We plan to summon a broom.”

“Huh,” Harry hadn’t considered that, but after a moment he frowns. “The broom sheds were locked. You can try and hope someone has one without anti-theft wards in the castle, but I wouldn’t count on it.”

The dome clears again, revealing the unholy mix of manticore and fire crab that is Hagrid’s blast-ended skrewt.

“What the fuck is that?” Romanov shouts from below them. The skrewt turns to the sound. At least, Harry thinks that’s the front end.

“Acromantulas can climb,” Delacour says. “She will not be safe in the

trees."

"Would spongifying the ground stop the vibrations traveling as far?" Harry asks Hermione.

She tilts her head, considering, as Romanov discovers that skrewts can turn themselves into a missile with one fiery fart. "Not entirely."

"How about a decoy. What's the biggest thing you can transfigure?"

Trelawney chews her lip. "A cat."

Harry hides a grimace. "Okay, we can work with that." Somehow. Surely.

"Acromantulas are afraid of snakes," he muses because the words keep tickling the back of his mind, but he can't see how they fit into a plan yet.

"How in Merlin's name do you know that?" Cedric wonders.

"Hagrid. A snake moved into the forest for a while near where the colony lives and displaced them." It was some kind that even Hagrid didn't recognise, a green thing as thick as a man's thigh.

Cedric snaps his fingers. "Is *that* where all the spiders came from? It was a few years before your time, Amelia. The castle was overrun by spiders the size of plates for weeks. They all wanted to hide in the basement. We never figured out how they were getting into the common room." He shudders.

"We're lucky the snake wasn't large enough to worry the adults or we would've had a few bigger problems on our hands," Harry says. But that's just the problem – a small snake won't cut it and Trelawney can't transfigure anything bigger.

It clicks. He turns to Trelawney. "Can you cast engorgio?"

"Yeah."

"It'd need at least three. I'm not sure your transfiguration would hold up." He hums. "That can be a backup plan."

The skrewt is moving sluggishly but still swinging as Romanov makes his way back across the moat. He dodges the stinger and hits the underside with another stunning spell. It still doesn't go down. Quintapeds are far more spell resistant.

“I don’t know if quintapeds can climb,” Harry says, darting a glance at Hermione.

She shakes her head. “I haven’t read anything either way, but I wouldn’t put it past them, considering the shape of their feet.”

“Best not to risk getting cornered up a tree,” Harry says.

“What do I do, then? Everything I’ve read said quintapeds don’t have a weakness.”

“You could try the Killing Curse or Imperius. If those don’t work, no spell will,” Harry says, but before Görder can panic, he smiles. “Nothing is invulnerable. They were contained on an island because nothing else could hold them. What does that tell you?”

Her eyes brighten. “They can’t swim. The moat should be safe.”

“We just need to figure out how to get you there and back as fast as possible,” Harry smiles with confidence he doesn’t feel. “I think that’ll be safer than waiting out the nine minutes by the gates.” Quintapeds are relentless and resourceful.

“Ooh, that’s just mean,” Cedric says.

“What is?” Harry looks to the pitch. There is a small pedestal with a black shroud over the top. Well, there’s the lethifold.

“That table is where they put your wand.”

“Ah.” What are the chances Penchev knows a wandless summoning spell? From the volume of his swearing, not great.

The fabric flows like ink to pool several feet from the table. Penchev probably can’t just kick it over. At least, Harry wouldn’t want to get that close.

Penchev heads for the island first. There might be something in the bag he can use. Harry gives him points for not getting caught up on the problem.

“Quintapeds are particularly interested in human flesh,” Hermione says. Harry eyes her as Görder pales rapidly. She couldn’t have found a more tactful way of warning her?

She winces apologetically, “I just mean, it might not be as interested in you in your animagus form.”

“Oh,” Görder lets all her breath out in a whoosh.

“That’s a good point. It works for werewolves,” Harry says around stirring hope.

“Well, quintapeds are not as driven by instinct as werewolves, but it is worth trying,” Hermione says.

“Right. Other options?”

Cedric and Hermione start throwing ideas around, Krum offering the occasional suggestion. Delacour has an arm around Trelawney, smoothing her hair. She doesn’t look well.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” Harry asks her quietly. “You don’t have to enter the pitch if it’s too much. There’s no shame in knowing your limits.”

“But I’d forfeit my wand. I’d just be postponing my death,” Trelawney says.

“You won’t be alone, though. You’ll have us and our wands. There are hardly ever two individual tasks in the same Games.”

“You’d still help me? Even though I wasn’t a good friend to you?”

“I’d do my best.”

She stares into space for a minute.

Penchev pokes the lethifold with a long stick. Tendrils shoot out and wrap around it. Penchev yanks, the table shakes but doesn’t fall. He is forced to let go before the tendrils reach his hands.

“If I don’t have my wand I’ll die. I have to try.”

“Okay. Is there anything else you need?” It’ll be her turn soon. Penchev has managed to bait the lethifold away from the table by throwing a potions flask at it. He sprints for his wand, reaches it as a tendril catches his ankle, and goes down hard. Harry hears his chin hit the pedestal from the stands and winces, “Ooh, ouch.”

“No. Thank you for helping me.”

“No worries,” Harry says distractedly. Penchev gets a hand on his wand as the lethifold reels itself in, but almost drops it, shouting in pain when the shroud reaches his legs. He rolls over and the white

stream of a patronus slams into the lethifold like a wall. It shrieks and throws itself backwards. Harry whooshes out a breath.

“I hope you win,” Trelawney says.

Harry tilts his head. She’d used that I-know-something-you-don’t voice. He gets the feeling she’s not talking about a small thing like the task, and he doubts she means the Games – she once told him he wouldn’t be a victor and she doesn’t renege on her predictions. “Is something going to happen after?”

“Nothing is set in stone. It could happen. You could win or lose. I hope you win.”

The dome blacks out and Crouch calls Trelawney’s name.

Delacour sweeps her off her feet in a hug. Their eyes meet over her shoulder. “Good luck,” Harry says.

Trelawney’s eyes snag on something past Harry; Riddle, close enough to have been eavesdropping. He holds her gaze for a long moment. When Crouch raises his voice, Trelawney blinks and leaves.

The acromantula is racing around the walls trying to escape the bright arena. For an absurd moment, it almost looks like a small spider stuck in a bathtub, but those are trees, not mould. It must be as big as Aragog.

Harry clenches the railing. He would rather face every creature back-to-back than helplessly watch.

Trelawney has to push through several silk threads to get out the entryway. The acromantula stops and taps its legs in interest. It turns.

“*Accio broom!*” Trelawney shouts.

Harry crosses his fingers.

The acromantula doesn’t wait; it races along the wall toward her. Trelawney stumbles out of the tunnel when she sees it coming. Her conjunctivitis curse connects and the spider shrieks. It rubs its eyes with its pedipalps.

Trelawney backs away. The acromantula taps the wall. Harry kicks the railing and stomps his feet, but the acromantula doesn’t seem to notice him. It crawls unerringly in her direction.

Trelawney freezes and the spider stops too. Her wand moves in a repetitive flick, swirl, flick – practicing the spider repelling charm, or trying to cast it silently.

After a minute, the acromantula continues forward and Trelawney casts, "*Arania exumai!*"

It is blasted back no more than a metre. It shrieks and lunges, but the spell turned it, and it misses Trelawney. The broom isn't coming.

"Come on, more flick, more power!" Harry says. Fleur grabs his hand and just about squeezes his fingers off.

"*Avada kedavra!*" Harry is unsurprised when green light ricochets off its carapace.

Trelawney loses her nerve and runs.

It's on her back in seconds, fangs in her leg. Fleur screams.

"Agh! *R-relashio!*"

It lets go, but she is too slow on the follow through, and it bites down again. It hits her chest.

Worst case, punctured lung. Harry starts running through healing spells. Necrotic venom. It will have to be vanished before it kills too much tissue, especially if it is pooling in the lungs. Can't constrict the venom to the limb now, it is close to the heart. She will have a high pulse, fast flow rate. Five minutes, maybe less, but it's fixable. If she gets out, Hermione can heal it; unlike Harry, she's got her wand.

The acromantula combs its back legs over its abdomen and pulls out a sheet of silk. It rolls Trelawney onto her back.

"*Diffindo,*" she slurs.

The spell barely cuts through the silk. It doesn't scratch the spider's weak underside. Then her wand falls out of numb fingers.

Harry bows his head. The hand Fleur is squeezing doesn't feel attached to his body. They watch until the flash and she is gone.

"Repose en paix," Fleur chokes out. She roughly scrubs her face.

"Do you know what you're going to do about the dragon?" Hermione asks.

That is the last thing on Harry's mind right now. "I don't want to –"

"Harry." She takes his cold hand. Hers is trembling slightly. Maybe the distraction is for her as much as she is offering it for him.

He takes a deep breath. "Maybe everyone can help. I'll need a lot of options I can pick from depending on what species I get." His eyes fall on the kids, their tear-streaked cheeks pressed together. "Can you help me out, Amelia? You're brilliant with creatures."

Ganz enters the ring. The wampus hisses at her, but she knows better than to meet its eyes and fall under its hypnotic spell.

"Umm. Their scales absorb magic. All over. Their undersides are well protected in all species, not just Ukrainian Ironbellies."

Harry hums to show he's listening. Ganz is making short work of the wampus. She set a glowing lattice of some kind that slowed it down enough for her to hit it with an impedimenta and then wrap it head to tail in ropes.

"Dragons are less protected in their eyes, nose, and mouth. Except Chinese fireballs – their eyes stick out of the side of the heads, so they're better protected, or they'd scratch them bumping into things."

"Huh, I didn't know that."

Ganz finishes in under four minutes. The gamemakers wheel out Bronner and the manticore.

Hermione and Krum chip in a few ideas to exploit the weaknesses Amelia is highlighting. They are having trouble finding a spell that would be effective at more than just pissing it off. He takes note of a few for last resort. He'd rather not hurt the dragon if he doesn't need to.

They debate the merits of illusions and whether he will need to replicate scent and sound as well. Harry doesn't tell them he has already ruled that option out; his senses aren't good enough to pick up the details he'd need to replicate to fool a dragon.

"A lot of European dragons can be distracted by shiny objects, particularly gold," Amelia says.

"Can you produce a gold oppilo shield?" Roger asks. "Or silver. Hey, Amelia – do you think dragons recognise their own reflection? If not,

it might be distracted into a threat display."

"I don't think I want to provoke it."

"Oh, no," Amelia assures. "Threat displays start as bluster and that can carry on a long time if the opponents are evenly matched. And considering they'll be identical…"

"Dragons are quite intelligent though. It could recognise it's reflection."

"Or notice the missing smell and sound. It's the illusion problem all over again," Hermione says.

Bronner is on his way back to the gate when he has a near miss with the manticore's stinger. It tears through his backpack and the only reason Harry is sure it didn't clip skin is because he doesn't immediately drop dead.

"Ooh! Close escape!" Bellatrix hisses gleefully.

The expansion charms fail in spectacular fashion. Materials and potions are flung out in all directions, and it is anyone's guess what volatile combinations will result. Bronner is quick enough to shield most of the splash and explosions. He follows up with a bubblehead charm which protects his lungs and eyes from the multicoloured gas, but not his skin.

The manticore recoils from the onslaught. Bronner stumbles through the gate looking woozy, one leg blackened and brittle, the other rapidly growing red hair, while a sticky green vapour eats through his shirt.

Romanov reaches for his wand to help, but it is locked in his holster. Instead, he loses crucial seconds contesting with Bronner's uncooperative limbs. He is saying something rapidly in Russian but Bronner doesn't seem to notice the burns on his back, let alone the words. Romanov looks to the sky, but a sponsor gift doesn't come.

Hennequin is shaking. This isn't going to go well, and chimaeras behave more like dragons than lions; they start consuming their prey alive. Harry turns to Amelia and Görder. They don't need to see it, especially Görder, before she faces her own maneater.

"I don't think it'll be a Welsh green. They seem to be building up to a big finale," Harry says. It's in rank order, but he doesn't think the kids

have internalised what that means. He doesn't want Görder to fixate on how few dragons are ranked more dangerous than a quintaped. A nervous breakdown will not help her. "So it'll be one of the showy western species."

"Oh, that makes sense," Amelia says. "Hungarian horntail, Ukrainian ironbelly, Romanian razorwing, or Russian ravager."

It's a narrower problem, easier for them to focus on. They turn their attention away from the arena. When Hennequin is backed into a wall, smoking, pinned through by the sharp tail, and the crowd groans, Görder looks up. "What? What happened?"

"What were you saying about the ravager's cold tolerance?" Harry asks. He is in her way. She's twelve. She's easily distracted, if not by Harry's problems, then by her own as he gently quizzes her on backup plans.

The chimaera starts with his guts. It takes him ten minutes to die. Harry grinds his teeth and can do nothing, not even put him out of his misery.

…

The nundu is almost as big as the Cerberus, but Delacour knows what she's doing. She leads with a strong stream of air, and with the poisonous gasses taken care of, it's just a giant, murderous cat. Her hair shines as she dodges and casts. The nundu stares at the dazzling strands and swipes half-heartedly.

"Oh, no you don't," Harry grabs the back of Roger's shirt before he can get his other leg over the railing.

"Let me go! Fleur, darling!"

"Wait here. She's coming back." Harry dodges the back of Roger's skull before it breaks his nose and quickly looks around in case he needs to stun anyone else. Cedric is dazed but Krum and Hermione seem to have the situation in hand.

"She's coming back to me?"

"Sure, mate, just for you." Romanov seems to have built up an immunity and Harry's not sure Bronner could go after her if he tried. "You wouldn't want to disappoint her by leaving?"

“Never!” Roger’s eyes narrow. “You’re not just trying to take my girl? No, Riddle wouldn’t let you.” Roger placates himself and stops struggling. The nundu starts to purr.

“I’m going to assume that’s the allure screwing with your head and not how you think romance should work.” Harry gets Roger back behind the railing. He wouldn’t make it to the nundu and the fall wouldn’t kill him, but the spells built into the dome to stop interference might.

“Miss Görder,” Crouch calls.

The quintaped is a furry, five-legged beast. It doesn’t have fangs or stingers or claws; the danger is in its intelligence and relentless hunger.

It is the product of human transfiguration gone wrong – irreversible, unalterable, unstoppable, except by a few illegal spells that Harry doesn’t think a twelve-year-old can manage. But Görder is an orphan, maybe she’s mature enough, maybe she lost her parents late enough to understand death – to understand that it does not mean they’ve just gone away. She’s more powerful than Trelawney. There’s a chance, but by far her best chance is to avoid the fight entirely.

The quintaped catches her scent the moment she enters the arena.

Görder grabs her wand, transforms into a stoat, and runs. Harry quickly loses track of her. The quintaped doesn’t. It follows a zigzagging path, intent on slight movements in the grass.

Harry pulls Hermione close under his arm. She’s as pale as Harry feels.

“That’s not a werewolf-like response,” she says. “Do you think it knows?”

“I’m not sure.” It hasn’t attacked. It swipes at the grass, cuts her off until she’s running in circles. She manages to escape the corral and worm underneath a large rock, but the quintaped easily flips it over and drags her out by the tail.

Görder hangs completely limp.

Amelia starts crying.

“She’s not dead. Just pretending or knocked out,” Hermione says quickly, “or she’d revert to her human shape.”

The quintaped doesn't know it could have a meal if it just squeezes a bit too hard. It's the only thing saving her.

It pokes her a few times, and looks unsurprised when Görder makes a break for it after it drops her. The next leg is ready to block her, and it lets her run through its fingers, batting at her like a cat.

"It knows," Harry realises. Hermione flinches. It's toying with her. It wants her to transform back. It'll hurt her when its patience runs out.

Five minutes – that's how long she has to survive before the gate unlocks. Görder is trying to get back to wait for it to open – a good call – but the quintaped seems to realise she could leave the way she entered. It catches her and tosses her away whenever she makes progress.

It throws her further than usual. It looks like a mistake, like she has time to transform. It's a trap.

"*Avada ked–*"

The waiting quintaped clears the distance in one leap and bowls her over. She is shrinking again but it's too late; it snaps her neck.

Görder vanishes before most people realise what's happening. There is a moment of shocked silence, then Cedric pulls Amelia into his arms. Her horrified shriek immediately turns into wracking sobs. Ganz looks away uncomfortably.

"It just – she – and, and – gone!"

Romanov doesn't dare meet Cedric's eyes.

"It was quick and painless. She didn't suffer," Cedric says.

"She's still dead!"

"Not – not in vain. She helped save the world," Cedric says uncertainly. Because that's the line his parents would've fed him. Grieving is for funerals, not the Games. Those deaths are to be celebrated. But it's harder to reconcile when it happens in front of you, to a girl you know, who did nothing wrong.

Amelia only cries harder. There doesn't appear to be much comfort in familiarity. Harry rubs her back.

"Sorry," she sobs into Cedric's shoulder.

“What are you sorry for?” Harry asks, interrupting the ‘it’ll be alright’ he can see tumbling out of Cedric’s mouth on reflex.

“We promised each other we’d be strong!”

Harry is immediately blisteringly angry. How *dare* the Ministry lie to this girl until she feels ashamed to cry after watching her friend die. He is almost shaking with it, but his hands stay light. He brushes her hair away to meet her eyes, but she spins off Cedric to latch onto him instead.

“Mr Potter,” Crouch calls.

“You are strong. Does any other emotional reaction make you weak? Are you allowed to laugh when you hear something funny? What if it makes you so happy you cry? Is that weakness?”

“Mr Potter!”

“No, it’s not. So why should you not be allowed to feel sad about a terrible tragedy?”

“*Relashio*,” Crouch casts and Amelia is flung off him. “*Now*, Mr Potter.”

Crouch gestures down the stairs, the threat and demand for silence clear in his eyes.

Harry turns back to Amelia. “Did he hurt you?”

She shakes her head.

Crouch looks down his nose. “Miss Görder made a noble sacrifice. That is what you should remember. And strive to emulate.”

Harry bares his teeth. “I’ll be right back.”

The stairs are a ratchet. With each step, Harry takes one of the thoughts crowding his conscience and pushes it deep into his mind. What ifs, regrets, doubts. Trelawney, Görder, the champions he barely knew – he can mourn with his friends later. He refuses to add his name to their remembrances, to add to their pain. He can’t keep them alive if he gets eaten by a dragon. Bellatrix is jeering; she doesn’t matter. Neither does the Ministry or their hopes for his death. Anger will only lead to stupid mistakes; it needs to go as well. By the bottom step he is focused.

The gate opens. As Harry crosses the threshold, the sound and sight of the crowd vanishes. Harry hardly notices. He's listening for warnings; growling, wingbeats, a deep breath.

The enormous dragon is in the centre of the pitch. Black, long and lizard-like, covered in bronze spines – it's a Hungarian horntail. Mature female. Of course, it's the breed even dragon tamers are leery of, and he is in open ground with nowhere to hide. She spots him immediately and crouches low, tail swishing.

Harry walks forward and doesn't take his eyes off her for a second. A flick of his fingers and his wand jumps from the pedestal into his hand, and just as well, because the dragon breathes in –

Harry conjures a boulder to wait out a stream of fire. A blast of oven-heat hits him and Harry is sweaty in seconds. The flame-freezing charm is no use here. It goes on for far longer than Harry would like, until the rock is red hot at his back.

The dragon snaps her mouth shut with a frustrated hiss. There is a whistling sound – Harry has a split second to wonder what it is, decide he doesn't care, and *move* – before her tail sweeps his boulder aside like a bowling ball. As he rolls clear, he rearranges his priorities; the claws are a secondary problem. Between her fire and her tail, the dragon can reach across the entire arena. He needs to deal with those first.

Harry doesn't wait for her to get her breath back. He starts running, and casts, "*Langlock!*"

The horntail rears back, shaking her head. She opens and closes her jaws, trying to free her tongue from the roof of her mouth.

Well damn, Snape's spell worked. If Harry survives this, he's going to have to thank the grumpy bastard.

The dragon narrows angry yellow eyes and pounces, and shit, she's faster than anything that size has a right to be.

Harry rolls under a snap of teeth, dodges front legs that pulverise the ground where he was standing moments before, and keeps running.

He aims straight up and puts as much power into the word as he can, "*Glacius!*"

A blast of icy air hits her underbelly and catches her wings, flaring

them out, and boy does she *not* appreciate it. The dragon shrieks and jumps up, which helpfully gets her hindlegs out of Harry's way. He has reached the lake. It is icing up around the edges. The temperature in the entire arena is below freezing. Hopefully that'll slow the reptile down a little, but if it's going to work, it doesn't immediately.

There's a warning whistle from that whip-fast tail, bearing down from above, poised to swat him like a bug. An idea hits him first. Harry rolls and casts. The tail slams into the ground, right on top of Harry's sticking charm. He finishes rolling to his feet and adds another freezing charm to harden the dirt around all those spines into cement.

He doesn't hang around to see if it worked, because she's whirling around – so *quick*, goddamn – she's so close he can smell her breath.

Harry shifts, cranks his wings, and zips across the water. He lands next to the backpack and returns to his human shape just as her teeth chomp on empty air.

He grabs the backpack and doesn't turn around because he's still within her (frankly unfair) reach and he'll just take the long way around, thanks.

Her furious yowl as she lunges after him confirms that, yes, he has just pulled a dragon's tail.

He fires a flashbang jinx over his shoulder and almost blows out his own eardrums. If the sound doesn't disorient her, the purple sparks might. Downsides of super sight and hearing.

Harry conjures steppingstones at a speed that can barely keep up with his pounding feet, ducks another snap of teeth, and he is so glad he ran that obstacle course seven days a week.

He clears the lake and doesn't turn around until he's beyond the tree line. The horntail is crouched low and menacing. She meets his eyes and hisses. It's garbled around her tongue but still intimidating enough to make his knees shake.

Harry doesn't want to take any bets on how long it'll take her to break free. He runs back as fast as he can, only skidding to a stop when he is safely behind the gate.

Crouch's disgruntled face is the first one he sees.

"Well, that was bracing," Harry tells him, distantly aware he's

grinning like a lunatic.

Crouch's scowl is lost behind frizz as Hermione throws herself down the last stairs and wraps him in a stranglehold, shouting something about that being so much worse than the stunts he pulls in Quidditch.

Congratulations and relief rain down from above. Harry struggles to pick out individual words when he's still primed for a physical fight. He is buzzing out of his skin and nowhere close to coming down from the greatest spike of adrenaline in his life.

One voice, not raised above the rest, nevertheless cuts through the noise. "Impressive performance," Riddle says steadily, but his pupils are blown wide.

Danger. Harry's focus redirects.

"Clever. Courageous. Capable." Riddle's tongue darts across his bottom lip.

"Is that what charms you, Riddle, not anything else he can do?" Romanov nudges him. Riddle removes the arm from his person. He looks like he wants to remove it from Romanov's person as well.

"You won't mind sharing will you, Riddle?" Stoeva suggests.

Harry isn't sure what his face is doing, but from her expression it might be a bit feral.

Riddle's eyes flash. "Try it. See what happens."

Stoeva bristles. "Be like that and *I* won't share the honour with *you*."

"I see your word means nothing."

"To a mudblood?" she laughs. "Know your place."

"You called dibs when he was boring," Romanov adds.

"Bella," Riddle says. "Control your dogs," *or I will*, is implied, but no one else catches it.

Stoeva snarls.

"Potter is still boring," Bellatrix sneers. "Stupid, like any Gryffindor. He got lucky this time. But luck doesn't last. We'll kill you."

“Will you?” Riddle asks, all silken danger and offering one last safety line by allowing that last bit to be a slip of the tongue.

And Bellatrix – doesn’t back down.

That’s new.

She is fixated on Harry, but she must have noticed the threat. The arena has made her bold.

“Mr Riddle,” Crouch calls.

It’s certainly just a coincidence that when Stoeva turns, she trips into Bellatrix and falls down the stairs. Riddle steps over her.

“Disgusting,” Hermione glares at the girls, and then after Riddle for good measure. “Like you’re a prize cut of meat. Like you *belong* to anyone.”

“Ignore them,” Harry says. He presses one last thought into the back of his mind for later: new boundaries are easiest to press, but there’ve been no more attempts to touch, and no legilimency. Riddle has never acted like he owns Harry’s life, only his untimely death.

“You’re supposed to run away from dragons, not underneath them! Don’t scare me like that,” Cedric ambushes him with a hug on the viewing platform.

A lot of the champions are looking at him differently. Ganz gives him a wary nod.

“Merlin, Harry, I didn’t know you could fight like that,” Roger says. “We’ll kick arse in the next task!”

Delacour gives a nod – she’s back on board too.

“And the third,” Harry promises. He scans the alliance. Two empty places where people should be. No more. He doesn’t have to watch them fight alone anymore. “The rest of us will make it.”

Crouch clears his throat. “As you know, Mr Riddle is going to face a basilisk. Meeting a basilisk’s gaze is lethal if direct and will paralyse if viewed through an intermediary. Our omnioculars will avoid the head, but our audience can be assured that no glimpse will be broadcast as the gaze is powerful enough to instantly destroy the equipment and records. For our in-stadium audience, viewer

discretion is advised. The dome will clear in ten seconds. Mr Riddle, step up to the gate."

Riddle does so, appearing completely unbothered. He closes his eyes.

There is a sudden shuffle as most of the champions turn their backs, not daring to watch.

Harry stares at Riddle. His eyes cross Bellatrix's, as one of the few doing the same. There is a giddy smile on her face. "This is it! The biggest stage, there could be no more dramatic moment! Finally, they will all see."

"Three, two, one!"

The gates open. Riddle's wand jumps into his hand as he strolls forward.

"*Obscuro*," he casts and opens his eyes.

The basilisk would surely kill anyone else. Without legilimency how would they even know where to aim, or whether the blindfold charm worked? But the Gamemakers have underestimated Riddle. He makes it several more metres, casts a permanent sticking charm, and doesn't drop dead.

Harry catches sinuous movement out the corner of his eye. But if he can trust anything, he can trust Riddle to be competent. Heart pounding, Harry looks. The basilisk is bright green with a red feathered plume and at least thirty feet long. He shakes his head irritably but can't dislodge the black cloth secured around his eyes. He flicks his tongue and turns unerringly to face Riddle.

"You can look now," Harry says. Very few people turn around.

"What do you – Harry! You *watched?*" Hermione slaps his arm.

Riddle steps aside and the basilisk strikes where he was standing. A tongue flick, readjustment, then he strikes again, but he overbalances.

Riddle tilts his head. He points his wand to the side and casts a siren hex at a volume that makes Harry cringe. The basilisk doesn't react.

Bellatrix makes a sound like a kettle full of distilled frustration.

The basilisk is deaf. So either the Gamemakers don't think pulling a rooster out of a hat would make a good finale, or they are really

determined to kill Riddle.

“Is that a bubble-head charm?” Harry wonders. The spell starts normally, then expands to cover Riddle’s whole body in a silvery film. Harry’s eyebrows shoot into his hairline and heat floods him, tingling where it meets his fingers on the cold railing, because he’s pretty sure Riddle just modified a spell off the top of his head.

“Oh, that’s clever,” Hermione says. “It’ll block his scent.”

The basilisk flicks his tongue and slithers to the spot where Riddle cast the charm. He circles, confused, and then follows the scent trail back to the gate. Harry really hopes that door holds.

Harry doesn’t see Riddle collect the backpack. He is a bit distracted by the basilisk rearing up, tongue flicking, trying to orient himself, growing more agitated. His head is level with the viewing area. One counter spell and Riddle could cut a swathe through his competitors.

Riddle probably wants Harry alive to take out Bellatrix. Probably. But Bellatrix is watching too. Harry wrenches his eyes away from the basilisk. He ignores a hiss so deep it is more of a roar that rattles his bones. He keeps his eyes firmly on Riddle.

Backpack in hand, Riddle, strolls toward the colossal snake blocking his way out. Harry wonders what Riddle is planning to do. There’s very little point attacking the basilisk – they’re even more spell resistant than dragons.

Riddle casts a diagnostic charm. The air around the basilisk’s jaw flash a pattern that indicates stiff joints. It’s the kind of indicator Harry would expect for arthritis or bone fusion. But the brightness of the diagnosis indicates the inner ear bones are completely immobile, and only curses are that thorough. It’s curable, but it’d be a task more suitable for curse-breaking than healing. Riddle doesn’t try either method.

He puts his backpack on the ground and opens it. Then he pulls off a shoe and sock and drops the sock into the bag. The moment it leaves his hand, the basilisk sits up, crest flaring and tongue flicking.

Harry’s heart seizes in horror and Hermione gasps as she realises. Bellatrix squeals and cackles which impresses the need to turn around on any champions still holding out.

The basilisk slithers up to the backpack. The opening is comically

small, but that isn't enough to stop an undetectable extension charm. The basilisk starts to shrink, snout first, and more and more of his body fits inside the bag. As the tail tip disappears, Riddle casts a localised anti-portkey ward on the material, then he closes the zip and slings it over a shoulder.

Riddle looks vastly amused by the aghast crowd he finds on the other side of the gate. "Onto the second task, then?"

Bellatrix tries to say something, mouth moving excitedly. She stomps her foot when she realises nothing is coming out. Harry didn't see anyone cast a spell; it is like she is under a geas.

"Mr Riddle," Crouch croaks. "We cannot allow you to keep that."

"I'm sorry, you said I had ten minutes collect supplies from the arena, did I exceed the time limit?" Riddle has eight minutes to spare, and he knows it. He casts *tempus* and Harry can feel the smugness rolling off him. "Apparently not."

"The guardian is not part of the designated resources," Crouch splutters.

"It certainly is. I get to claim the bag and the contents therein." Riddle shakes the backpack. It probably has stability spells on it, or half the champions would have smashed potions leaking out the bottom, but everyone still flinches back a step. Harry is not sure that it has even occurred to some of them that basilisk venom is one of the most corrosive natural substances and it can burn through all enchantments. If the basilisk spills even a drop, say, attacking a smelly sock, then that bag's insides will very quickly be outside. He glances down and frowns, puzzled; the sock and shoe are back on Riddle's foot. Still, Harry considers the size of the snake and takes a few more steps back.

Crouch's eyes brighten as he comes to a similar realisation. "The basilisk could destroy your bag. You are risking losing your supplies and severe injury at any moment," he tells Riddle as if he hasn't realised.

"Possible, I suppose." Riddle rolls his shoulders under the very poorly secured weapon of mass destruction.

Crouch's face goes a few shades closer to purple, but just before he can let off steam in an eruption, Riddle interrupts with another quip. "Well, I'm not volunteering to coax him back out. Are you?"

It is the last straw.

“Fine. Keep the bomb on your back and think yourself very clever,” Crouch says spitefully. “You may have circumvented its portkey while the basilisk is in your bag, but know that you are not keyed to add anti-portkey wards to the Hogwarts grounds.”

The message is clear: Riddle will use the basilisk in ways the Ministry approve of, or they’ll take it off him. They can activate the portkey at any moment. This news is not enough to stop Riddle looking like the cat that caught the canary.

“Much obliged.” He turns that shark smile on his allies and offers up the bag. “Stoeva, would you like to help yourself to my supplies? Since you’re so keen on sharing.”

She recoils and stutters, “No, Riddle.”

“Romanov?”

He can’t meet his eyes. “No, thank you.”

“Bella? You admired the runespoor so. Do you want to see this beautiful creature up close?”

Bellatrix’s mouth works soundlessly, awe overtaken by fear. She shakes her head.

“That’s what I thought.”

“You could stand to be a little less terrifying,” Harry tells him. And yet, Harry cannot be anything but relieved Riddle survived.

Chapter End Notes

> First, to head off any panic the unexpected deaths might’ve caused, because I know some of you have been burnt before – I'm not the kind of author who subverts expectations just for the sake of shock twists and gratuitous misery. This is not the final season of Game of Thrones. I am not going to upend my carefully laid plans just for the hell of it. I am laying breadcrumbs hoping that I'll get a tsunami of comments at the big-reveal-points saying "I FUCKING KNEW IT!". I love it when you can almost guess what’s going to happen. And to that end…
>
> **WARNING:** if you want to try to predict the ending entirely on

your own, avoid reading the comments. Some people have asked if you are allowed to post speculation, and you certainly are. Those are my favourite comments. I often won't confirm or deny your theories because that would spoil things for you, which makes them tricky to reply to, but just know that I enjoy it immensely and I'm cackling madly whether you're right or wrong. But if you don’t want to stumble on speculation which could colour your own expectations, be aware that it could be there and steer clear.

Fight or flight

Chapter Summary

The champions can't catch a break. Onto the second task.

Chapter Notes

For a reminder of who is in which alliance, check chapter 2 of the support fic: https://archiveofourown.org/works/54010258/chapters/139911160

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry's stomach rumbles. The sun is setting, and he is coming down from a dragon-induced adrenaline high. All he wants to do is eat and sleep. And maybe find Snape to thank him or to rub his face in his expectations, Harry hasn't decided.

"This way, champions," Mr Crouch calls.

But when they hit a fork in the path, Crouch turns towards Hagrid's hut, not back to the castle. Hermione makes an alarmed sound and reaches into her bag. She comes out with her armoured jacket. There is a pause, then a mad scramble to follow her lead as more champions realise they are heading straight for the second task.

Harry pulls his own jacket around his shoulders. It's a kind of dark leather, thinner than dragonhide. He's not sure how much it'll help, but it's better than nothing as a last resort. He fumbles with the clasp and smears a sticking charm down with his fingers. He doesn't trust Ministry issued material not to fail and expose him mid-battle.

Riddle does not reach into his bag for, uh, understandable reasons. That leaves only him, Roger, Gauthier and Bronner with less protection. Gauthier has no wand and Bronner can barely walk. Bellatrix is eyeing her own alliance members like they're fresh meat, and she's not the only one. Harry catches Ganz looking at Riddle. It would be good strategy to take him out before he can release the basilisk, to keep that wildcard out of play, but if she thinks Riddle is in any way vulnerable, she's got another think coming.

The group keeps walking as the shadows get longer and the air gets colder until it starts to snow. Bronner is lagging behind, dragging his blackened leg through the thin layer of powder. Romanov is the only

thing keeping him upright. He looks more alert than when he stumbled off the pitch, but that leg is completely petrified.

Romanov looks anxiously to the champions getting further ahead. Bellatrix raises an eyebrow. They try to pick up speed, but Bronner stumbles. The second time, it is Romanov who pulls them to a stop. Ignoring Bronner's protests, Romanov drops to all fours as he doubles in size and keeps doubling. He turns grey and leathery, and an enormous horn grows from his nose.

The rhinoceros swings his head rather gracelessly into Bronner's gut, and the boy folds over his long face like wet paper. He carries him like that, between two horns, and once Bronner stops squirming he catches up faster than Harry would expect for an animal so big and bulky.

Crouch stops before the edge of the forbidden forest. "Yes, you see the marker with your name? Stand on it." He urges the champions ahead, closer to the tree line. Crouch does not follow them. "Now, pay attention."

Harry turns reluctantly. He dislikes having his back to the forest and whatever the gamemakers have put in there, even less than he appreciated having a rhino behind him. Romanov is human again now. The markers are set in the order they faced the first task. Romanov deposited Bronner at his marker and had to leave for his own.

"The second task is a challenge of attrition and survival," Crouch says. Harry feels a frisson of power as the castle wards activate in a bright lattice. The dome starts to carve inwards above the central tower. A shape transformation, Harry realises. A sphere is the strongest shape for wards, which is what the castle wards must be, extending deep underground, but someone is pinching it into a donut – a *torus*, his inner Hermione insists. The centre hits the ground and spreads out rapidly, quickly releasing the castle residents from their confinement. It comes closer, past Crouch, but before anyone is tempted to run for it, the wards flash and stabilise, locking them in.

"You will compete across the Hogwarts grounds for the limited places in the third task. Those of you with bags will find they contain a list of the remaining champions." Crouch's eyes trail across the champions to land on Harry. "Once only three champions remain, the wards containing you to the grounds will lift. That signals the beginning of the third task, which is a race to the highest room in the tallest tower of the castle. There, you will find the Cup, and the Games will end

when one of you offers a drop of blood."

Harry closes his eyes. So that's how the Ministry intends to ensure they won't have too many survivors. It's not enough that he has to lose Riddle, they want him to lose four of his friends, and they want him to drive in the knife. The alliance's plans are up in smoke.

No. He won't have it. There must be another way. Later – he can figure it out later, he has to survive the next few minutes first. He –

His thoughts derail as pieces click together. Trelawney said there would be no victor in the second task. This could be exactly what she was warning them about. If the third task automatically starts when there are three people left, it is impossible for a champion to become a victor in the second task, unlike in some previous Games. Shit, what else was she right about? Her predictions were never pleasant.

"The second task will begin in thirty seconds. Your holsters will be unlocked upon the firing of the cannon," Crouch says, and then he turns on the spot and apparates away.

The crack bounces off the trees and then there is silence.

Gauthier tries to turn and sprint for the trees but falls heavily, legs twisted. His feet are stuck to the marker. He fumbles with his laces to get his shoes off.

Harry starts counting down in his head, but his adrenaline is firing up again and that means the world is slowing down. He has no idea how long a second lasts.

He glances to his side. Fleur is already looking back across the gap where Görder should be. There's been something wild in her eyes since Trelawney died.

"I'll cover defence," Harry says.

Fleur nods.

He tries to work out if she looks like she is planning to immediately turn on him after Crouch's announcement. He can't assume she will; facing her would mean turning his back on Riddle and potentially also a basilisk. He can't risk it.

Although, he thinks morbidly, her betrayal would solve one problem.

Harry doesn't want to fight Riddle. He wants to fly to where Bellatrix and her posse are scattered among Harry's friends and plant himself firmly between them. But he can't leave Fleur to face Riddle alone. Riddle might want to keep Harry around to kill Bellatrix, but Fleur has no such protection.

Omnioculars fan out safely on the other side of the wards. A few among the trees prepare to catch an alternate angle of the bloodbath.

On Fleur's other side, Bronner gamely stares down Ganz and Penchev. There shouldn't be an immediate attack from that direction, so Harry just has to watch out for more than a dozen wands worth of stray curses from behind while fending off Riddle. Which is something Riddle, at the end of the line, doesn't have to worry about, as if he needed any more advantages.

Riddle hasn't taken his eyes off him. He appears delighted to finally have Harry's attention. "Time for our duel, Harry."

Harry's count reaches zero and nothing happens for another few seconds.

And then the cannon goes off, so loud it hits him less as sound than a punch to the chest.

Flipendo, Harry reacts instantly, thrusting his left hand at Riddle while he releases and catches his wand in this right with a flick of fingers.

As Riddle braces behind a shield, Harry slashes his wand along a line between Fleur and Bronner and raises the earth into a wall, cutting off the rest of the champions.

The wall stops the stray spells but does nothing to block out the booms and screams.

Harry grits his teeth and turns his back. Fleur tucks in beside him, already cursing at Riddle.

"*Oppilo aurum album*," Harry casts. The platinum flows slowly. After a second it is the size of a coin, a few more and it is a buckler.

"Bold choice! But can you keep up?"

Riddle scatters his next volley, aiming mostly at Fleur to force Harry to move the shield even further than usual to intercept them.

Fleur ducks behind Harry and that makes it easier. Harry plants his feet and tries to remember not to dodge. The shield keeps growing. He pours power and attention into it until the edges square off and it covers him from the neck down.

It's still too slow to recast in a regular duel, but with Fleur covering their attack, Harry doesn't need to drop it at all.

Riddle casts like a demon. If there were any weak points in the shield, he would've found them, and Harry shows no signs of tiring yet.

"Impressive," Riddle says, rising abruptly out of a duelling stance and into a prowl, "but no fun at all. Come now, Harry, this isn't your style." He flicks Fleur's spells aside negligently. Harry and Fleur circle in the other direction and start backing toward the forest. "Where's your creativity?"

"Harry," Fleur says with dawning horror, "we can't beat him."

"I know. We don't need to. Stick to the plan."

They just have to get out of range. Riddle should stay near the battlefield to regroup with the Blood Supremacists.

Hermione screams. It cuts through the din like Harry is specially tuned to the sound. Harry's gaze slips past Riddle to the earth wall. It's looking worse for wear, but there aren't enough holes to see what's happening behind it.

"Focus, Harry!" Fleur says.

Harry swears under his breath and backs up faster. A quick glance down to the reflection in his shield shows Harry they're almost at the tree line.

Riddle stalks after them with another barrage of spells. Harry's arm aches from the strain of the shield. "And you have stamina. But don't you think there are more enjoyable ways to expend it than by lifting heavy things?"

Harry spins it to catch a curved spell.

"I can make you drop that shield," Riddle tilts his head. "You know platinum doesn't block everything."

The unforgiveables. Riddle is threatening the killing curse. But if

Harry is right, and Riddle needs him or if he is not done playing this game, the cruciatus is about to head his way.

"*Accio*," Harry summons a rock with his spare hand. He sets it orbiting him. He has at most a second to decide whether to use it.

If it's the cruciatus and he misses the intercept, he's going to collapse and lose the platinum. If he succeeds, they're untouchable. But if it's the killing curse and that rock doesn't fly perfectly, he is dead. Fleur is behind him; he can't dodge.

Or he could abandon the stone and raise another earthen barrier. It would block either spell, but Harry can't cast it wandlessly – it would mean dispelling the platinum. Riddle will blast through the barrier and follow up with a barrage of spells before Harry can recast the platinum shield and he'll be forced to fight in earnest.

Harry must decide if he will bet that he is reading Riddle's motives right, and stake his life calling a bluff.

"*Imperio*," Riddle casts.

The rock intercepts the spell and explodes. Harry stares at the fragments. He doesn't know what this means. It is the one spell Riddle *knows* Harry can resist, rendering it no more than a harmless shield popper.

Shadows fold over them as Harry and Fleur back into the tree line. She darts right and he goes left, behind trunks wider than they are – all the shields they could need. Fleur cracks a disillusionment spell over her head, and has time to hit Harry as well.

"I'm on distraction," Fleur says.

"I'll cover us," Harry says. "On my mark."

He tilts the shield to look around his tree. Riddle takes a few more steps in their direction, eyes locked on the mirror, before he pauses and turns. A moment later the earth wall is blasted apart and Ganz and Penchev set in on him.

As the dust clears, Harry gets a glimpse of the carnage.

The battleground is pockmarked with craters. There are two lost backpacks, but if there were any bodies, they've already vanished. Most champions are nowhere to be seen, only the tail end of Romanov

and Mazet pursuing Roger and Cedric into the trees in the other direction.

“Now.”

Fleur conjures a swarm of wasps. Harry dispels the platinum and raises the earth at their backs, then they turn and run.

“Fleur, wait! We should circle around to help the others!”

She doesn’t slow down. “Soon the only ones hanging around here will be Supremacists!”

Which is a fair point.

The pair keep running until night falls in earnest. There are only two sets of footsteps crunching through the snow, and even those vanish quickly under their charm work. They slow to a walk, panting.

“*Homenum revelio,*” Harry casts. The spell shows him Fleur’s invisible form, but no one else. He sets his wand on his palm – it doesn’t spin. Riddle might be out of range or blocking it, but Harry doesn’t know how the connection works. “I think we’re clear.”

“Good,” Fleur sighs and her breath fogs the air. “Where is your whomping willow?”

Harry pauses. They were close to Hagrid’s place, but now he’s not sure. “*Point me*. This way.” The castle is east of the forest, they’re sure to run into it at some point.

Harry pulls his bag over his shoulder and aims his wand into it. “*Accio champion list.*”

Parchment flies into his hand. He flips it over quickly.

“What does it say?”

There are twenty-four names. That’s all they are to the Ministry – names on a page. Six are crossed out.

Harry brushes his thumb over Elizabeth Görder. He can hear her hitting the ground when he closes his eyes. And Sybil Trelawney, trying and failing with his spells. Maybe there was a different strategy that played more to their strengths and could’ve saved them. After all, the Goblet of Fire saw something in them, maybe –

“Bronner is dead,” Harry reads the only new name. His legs go a bit unsteady. Ganz didn’t get Riddle too. Bellatrix must be playing; she could’ve taken out a few champions with killing curses if she’d had a mind to, but they’re all alive – Hermione and Cedric and everyone else. Merlin only knows what state they’re in – safe or captured or injured – but alive. Anything else is fixable.

He folds the parchment into his jacket.

It’s a long walk. They’ve run further than Harry thought, but the worst trouble they encounter are a few patches of Devil’s Snare where the trees provide enough shelter for the plants to survive the snow. Fleur takes a few cuttings in case it comes in handy. They cancel the disillusionment charms after the third time they almost lose each other foraging.

They’re not in centaur or acromantula territory. Night is falling and wolves howl occasionally, but it’s not a full moon. It seems safe enough – quiet, but not too quiet. The Gamemakers could change that in an instant by portkeying in another dragon or two, but they usually allow champions some time to get organised before making things more exciting. The coverage will be focused on analysing replays of the first battle for a while yet.

Fleur flicks her hand. Harry raises a protego, then he hears it too.

“*Finite*,” Fleur casts.

Boutin shimmers into view as his disillusionment fails, frozen like a deer in headlights. He belatedly raises his wand, but he’s no match for either Harry or Fleur, let alone together. From the resigned look on his face, he knows it. Trying to sneak past, probably, rather than sneak attack. Maybe he’d be able to take one of them out with the advantage of surprise, but not both.

His other arm is hanging uselessly, muscles rippling with cramps.

Harry tilts his head. “You haven’t healed the poison yet?” Erkling toxin is nasty; painful as well as a paralytic.

Boutin jolts. Hesitates. “There are no antidotes in my bag.”

“Have you tried spells? Got a diagnosis?”

“It’s bypassing the nerves. Activating the muscles.”

Might be flooding the muscle with calcium ions. “Can I try something?”

Boutin and Fleur look at him oddly. “Could I stop you?”

“You could walk away,” Harry shrugs.

Boutin thinks about it. Eventually he shrugs, wincing with the movement.

Harry starts with the basic diagnostic spell Boutin likely used to confirm it is bypassing the nerves, then tries more specialised spells. He keeps his eyes on Boutin’s wand and his other hand ready to cast a shield. The calcium levels in his injured arm match his good one; the problem is the pumps that are supposed to move the calcium into storage after it has activated the contraction are blocked, and calcium is hanging around when it isn’t supposed to. It’s just a matter of unclogging a pipe.

“How’s that?” Harry asks. Boutin moves his arm tentatively, then more surely, eyes wide. “You probably feel like a wrung-out towel, but any cramps?”

“No,” Boutin blinks. “Umm.”

“Well, see you,” Harry says.

“Right.” Boutin takes a slow step back, then another, faster, until he is running.

Fleur watches him go. “You might regret that later.”

“I might,” Harry agrees. “Come on, I recognise this part of the forest. We’re not far from the edge.”

…

The willow is swaying deceptively gently below the stars. A quick check of the area shows no one within detection range.

“We’re here. Do you see the knot at the base? Like this,” Harry levitates a stick into it. The tree freezes. “Quick.”

Harry slides into the tunnel, Fleur on his heels. For all her occasionally prissy attitude, she doesn’t turn her nose up at the dirt.

“Stop,” she says, turning back to the entrance. “We crossed a ward.”

Her curse-breaking skill quickly has Harry's eyebrows lunging for his hairline. She finds a near invisible marker on the underside of a root. "Trip-line ward. We're not the first ones here."

Well, that could be good or bad.

A few more metres in, the tunnel is blocked off. Fleur casts a few detection spells. If anyone is behind it, they're well hidden.

Krum appears out of the wall to the side, wand levelled. Harry and Fleur raise theirs. There's no sign of Hermione or anyone else. Harry tenses. Did they get split up, or did Krum do something to her or *is* this Krum?

"What is the first thing you said to me?" Fleur asks.

"We were at the dance. I said, 'nice try, but I am used to full veela'. Try your allure now, prove it is you."

Fleur's hair seems to shine, her skin glows, but the compulsion doesn't make it through Harry's occlumency. It's a feeling that can't be mimicked by a spell, but Krum doesn't lower his wand yet.

"Potter, who first tackled you off a broom?" Krum asks.

Harry gapes. "How did you– ugh." He groans and lowers his wand, because only Hermione could've told him that story. "It was Sir Pounce-a-lot," Harry says. Krum's lips twitch and Harry blushes. "I was a *baby*. He was bigger than me."

Sirius still has the pictures.

"Come," Krum says. He vanishes into the side of the tunnel. Harry crouches to push against the apparently solid earth and his ears pop as he goes through the illusion. Around the bend it opens into a small room. Harry gets a glimpse of –

"Shit, Hermione," he darts forward.

"I'm okay," she says.

His eyes don't believe that, taking in the wound on her leg. Her backpack has been upended on the floor, the potions and ingredients spread out and rifled through.

"What's the situation?"

“Flesh-eating curse,” Hermione says. “We’ve broken the spell and I’m on the mend, albeit slowly.”

“That’s deep tissue damage,” Harry frowns at it. His stomach twists queasily. It looks like something has taken a huge chunk out of her. Could’ve spread to the bone, too. “Did you run on that leg?”

Hermione blushes. “Ah, no. I transformed, and Viktor carried me. I must thank you again.”

“You are a small fox. It was no problem,” Krum says. His eyes crinkle at the corners.

Harry hardly knows how to categorise the emotions that are sticking to his throat. He can barely remember when he wanted to doubt Krum. He keeps showing his true colours in big and small ways, and this – this is big.

Harry won’t say he owes Krum one, because he owes him more than one, more than a debt. But he still wants to say something. “Thank you. For not leaving her. I won’t forget it.” Krum meets his eyes for a long moment. He nods, and Harry turns back to Hermione’s wound. Curse damage can’t be fixed with a spell. “What’ve you done for it?”

“Took half a dose of Wiggenweld potion, supplemented with some restorative charms. I’ll be on my feet in a few hours.”

“Only half a dose?” he’s not questioning her judgement, but her reasoning. Are they that poorly stocked on healing potions?

“We have one dose each and no dittany,” Hermione says grimly, while Fleur takes a look at their wards and starts reinforcing them with her own expertise.

Krum grunts unhappily and goes back to sorting the potions by sight and smell because of course they aren’t labelled – no, far more entertaining for the audience to watch them mistake Fire-Acid for a Blood Replenisher in a pinch.

“We have many poisons. Not much else,” Krum says as he puts a black sludge that looks like doxycide into the largest pile. Harry is not surprised to see Cedric sitting out the potions task, but it would be right up Roger’s alley. Belatedly, he checks Cedric and Amelia over, but they’re at least upright. Amelia is drawn in on herself, staring at a wall. Not okay – something to keep an eye on.

“Any other injuries?” Harry asks.

“Nothing we haven’t fixed already.”

“And Roger?” he turns to Cedric. “I thought he was with you.”

Cedric looks away. “He, ah, went looking for dittany.”

And his search just happened to take him far from where he knows Harry would be. Harry wouldn’t be surprised if Crouch’s latest change to the rules was the last straw. “Mhmm. Well, if he comes back, you can tell him I’m working out the range on the wand connection and if I can block it. If Riddle tracks me, he won’t find me here.”

“Harry,” Hermione narrows her eyes. “We’ve discussed this. We should stick together.”

Harry nods. “But also consider – knowledge is power. The more we know about the arena, the better off we’ll be. I’m the obvious choice to scout quickly and quietly.”

Hermione glares. “You spent too much time with Tom.”

Which means he won the argument. That never used to happen. He’d agree Hermione made sense and half the time decide to go with his gut regardless.

“I’ll be back well before dawn if it’s safe. What else do we need that I could look out for?”

“Food.”

Harry eyes the pile. “There’s nothing?”

Cedric shakes his head.

That could be a problem. Flying burns a lot of energy and he hasn’t eaten since breakfast.

“That is a lot of ground to cover,” Fleur eyes him curiously.

“I’ll fly.”

“Do you want my help?” Krum asks.

Harry wants to decline. Krum is probably their next best duellist. Sending them both off leaves the remainder underdefended. It’s bad

enough that Harry has to leave while Hermione is injured. But they are a *team*, and Krum's falcon form can get around fast, and do things Harry can't. "You could check if we can get into the garden the elves maintain for the kitchen, and the gamekeeper's hut and veggie patch. Maybe bring some fish back from the lake." Harry is too small to do that.

Krum nods, brow crinkling. "We will get Hermione back on her feet first, and then I will go."

"Good plan," Harry says warmly. "Disillusion me?"

Harry puts his bag down, then he shrinks. He sprouts gold feathers and his face stretches into a long beak. His legs all but disappear beneath a long tail. He pumps his wings and zips up to eye level, but out of reach, because reflexes are faster than comprehension and if anyone has the instincts and ability to squish him, it'd be the international quidditch seeker.

"You are a snidget!" Krum smiles. He offers his hand and Harry lands on it. "Da, the flight will not take you long at all." Krum taps him gently on his head with his wand. "We must play tag sometime."

Harry whistles agreement as he takes on another layer of invisibility on top of his size and speed. He gives a test flap. The distortion in the air catches the light at certain angles – an iridescence that looks a bit like fairy wings.

With a thankful chirp, Harry takes off. He buzzes Hermione on the way past. She laughs and swats at him.

She'll be okay. She's a capable witch, mobile or not, and she's not alone. Krum stuck with her when it would've been easier to fly away, and he stood between her hiding place and a possible threat.

Harry doesn't bother freezing the willow. He zips out the tunnel and simply weaves between its irate branches. He flies straight up, until he is twice as high as the tallest tower and the grounds splay out beneath him.

The night is deceptively peaceful above the dark shadows where skittery things hide. Peaceful, but strange. Snow is only falling in a small section of the forest, while in the rest of it, it is like time has been rewound a few months; the trees are still red and losing their leaves. On the far side of the castle, the snow has already melted around the pitch and lake. It's vibrant and green. He can smell

flowers. The promise of sugar makes his hunger feel all the sharper, but he's not sure it'd be a good idea to dally around an area that the Gamemakers have clearly spruced up without backup.

Besides, he's looking for the Supremacists, and they can't have made it to that side of the lake this soon. They may still be hunting, hoping to catch more champions before they have a time to fortify and hiding spot.

Harry makes a beeline for the last place he saw them; the clearing where it began. The ground is pitted with craters and the dirt smells sour. He kicks up a cloud of ash when he transforms. He lays his wand in his palm – no response. The Supremacists could be out of range or they could've packed it in for the night behind wards. He doesn't know if his connection to Riddle will work regardless, but he needs to before he'll be able to sleep soundly.

In the blink of an eye, Harry takes off again.

The longer he takes to find them, the further they could go, but they won't stay far away. When they set up a base, they'll want to be centrally located so they can easily reach all corners of the arena to hunt. So they'll be nearer to the castle than the obscure depths of the forest. And close to a food source because that is one thing magic can't create. The lake, maybe, for the fish.

He lands on the bank, transforms, tries his wand. Nothing.

He tries the far side of the castle, the pitch, and the boathouse, in increasingly large spirals around the grounds.

It isn't until he drops in on the thestral herd that he sees it – his wand is turning. The holly is pointing further into the forest. Harry frowns. The Supremacists are still hunting, then.

"*Cave inimicum,*" he traces the concealment ward around himself. His wand sits inert, even when he focuses on Riddle. Good to know.

He takes to the air, dodges through the branches for another hundred metres or so, and checks again. He repeats the process a distressing number of times, and as the trees get bigger, he starts transforming on branches wider than he is, rather than risk detection by the Supremacists on the ground.

And then he hears it.

“What is it you want in return?” A deep, unfamiliar voice, still a ways off. Harry darts towards it.

“Nothing comes to mind right now,” Riddle says. “Let’s say, a favour of equal value to be collected at a later date.”

Harry peers around the next tree – coast clear – and zips closer.

There is a dull thud, something striking earth. “We owe this human nothing!” A third voice, and one Harry feels like he should know. When his next peak catches a glimpse of a centaur, jet black from head to tail, he remembers Bane. Harry thought he was going to kick Firenze for carrying Harry out the forest after his possessed Defence professor dropped him in the middle of nowhere to be eaten for no other reason than that’s the kind of thing that tickles a demon’s funny bone. “It is his people’s fault Ronan was nearly killed in the first place. He should be grateful if we call it even.”

Ronan doesn’t appear to be either of these two – perhaps the centaur injured in the first task? Harry perches to listen, and the cold immediately sinks through his bones.

Riddle stands in front of the two centaurs, apparently unphased by them looming over him. Harry doesn’t see the other Supremacists anywhere. Riddle doesn’t have his bag though, so it is unlikely he has struck out on his own.

“Hmm,” the slightly calmer centaur flicks his tail. “This one did not inflict the wound. Nor did he put Ronin in that situation. It was not his debt to settle.”

Bane stomps a hoof and looks away.

“It was not my wrong to right,” Riddle agrees steadily. “But I did go far out of my way to do it.”

“Watch your forked tongue.” Bane’s nostrils flare. “You are not a foal. Common curtesy does not require me to fire a warning shot at *you*.”

“Bane. He may be a schemer, but he is correct.”

“Magorian–”

“I have made my decision.” Magorian turns his proud gaze on Riddle. “Leave our territory and do not return unless it is to ask your favour. We will not see you twice, and we are not in mind to be lenient.”

Riddle bows deeply and leaves without another word.

Harry needs to retreat slowly and quietly. He doesn't want to test centaur senses or marksmanship. His take-off is sluggish. He feels weirdly sleepy. Concern pipes up in the back of his mind, but the thoughts are slow to form. He just knows there is danger somewhere, and his only defence is manoeuvrability, so he keeps flying.

He trails after Riddle. He watches the boy pick his way through the understory, glancing around the canopy for something. Glimpses of his upturned face cause the concern to jump, though Harry doesn't remember why, and he darts away a little faster.

Each time Riddle looks up, he lays his wand in his palm and watches it do not much of anything. At that, Harry feels a spike of something other than concern for the first time in a while. It takes longer than it should, but the pieces clunk together.

He is looking for Harry.

His wand can't point to Harry's because it is in pocket space while he is in his bird form.

He is looking for Harry because he is a legilimens, he can sense Harry's mind nearby.

Harry almost entered torpor.

Harry blinks. Blinks again, brain mostly spinning up to speed. Shit. Oh *shit*. He got cold enough to trigger torpor. His body was in the process of switching off to conserve energy when he took flight and generated enough heat to head it off. That was too close. Who knows how long it'd take for this part of the arena to warm up enough to bring him out of it naturally. His heart picks up in fear, and the spike in his undulled emotions are enough – Riddle looks right at him. His eyes finally catch on the gossamer flicker of his disillusioned wings, and he grins. "I know you're there."

Harry freezes. What he wouldn't give to be back in Gryffindor tower leeching Tom's body heat. He wants to transform and poke at Riddle until he figures out what he's up to out here, treating with centaurs alone. It might be safe to. If Riddle wanted Harry dead this early, he would've cast avada kedavra instead of imperio. Riddle might be itching for a proper duel, though, and if not death, Harry doesn't know how to end it. He might have to hurt Riddle or get hurt himself. But if Harry could predict Riddle, he would've cast *anything* except

imperio. He was wrong.

What he should do is drop back until Riddle loses track of him, then see if he can follow to spy on the Supremacists, to at least learn where they’re camping.

Harry doesn’t do what he wants to or should do – he flees.

Chapter End Notes

Harry. Mate. Buddy. You can't avoid your problems forever.

Hook, line, sinker

Chapter Summary

It would not be the second task without Harry going for a swim.

“There’s really no food in the gardens?”

Krum shakes his head. “Not a single sprout.”

“Where’d those come from?” Harry points to the side of the tunnel. After all, apples do grow on trees.

“Karkaroff sent me breakfast.”

“Oh, well, thanks for sharing,” Harry says, even as he frowns. It is a bad sign. Sponsors wouldn’t spend money on things they can easily get for themselves. There should be plants in the gardens regardless of the season. The grounds should also supply mushrooms, berries, nuts, tubers, greens, and Harry took enough wilderness survival lessons to know what he’s about, but he didn’t see so much as a dandelion when flying his circuits last night. The gamemakers have removed almost everything edible. As far as Harry knows, Romanov is the only animagus who can live off grass. It feels like something Umbridge would do – naughty children don’t get dinner, or some such rot.

“There must be *some* game in the forest. Their monsters would starve,” Cedric says.

“Yeah– *us*,” Harry mutters darkly.

“Then the lake is the only place we know we can get food,” Cedric says as he twirls his wand to rotate a fish above hot coals. Fleur stares at it bleary-eyed. “We need a second source. Or to be closer to the lake. If we are cut off, we will starve.”

Krum grimaces. When he’d returned with breakfast, he also carried the unfortunate news that the Supremacists had set up a fort in the early morning. They’ve planted themselves on the crossroad between the pitch, Hagrid’s hut, and the castle, overlooking the lake. They’re between the alliance and food.

“Getting further from the Supremacists would also be a good idea,” Krum says.

“They can just about see the willow from their camp. They will cross our paths often. If we leave any signs, they will quickly trace us back here,” Hermione agrees.

There’s a shuffle over the dirt as their last member drags himself from a sleeping bag. He returned only a few hours ago, just before dawn. Got everyone awake real quick, but at least it shows their security system works. Harry was surprised to see him at all.

“Roger. G’morning,” Harry yawns.

“Morning,” Roger says uncertainly. He eyes the fish. “Got enough for one more?”

“Sure,” Cedric says.

“Did you find any dittany?” Amelia asks.

Harry suspects he knows the answer, if there isn’t so much as a potato in reach.

“None in walking distance. The centaurs might have some.”

“The centaurs?” Fleur muses.

“They eschew urban areas and live mainly as hunter-gathers but that does not mean they are primitive,” Hermione says.

“I did not say they were,” Fleur says.

“Bad idea,” Harry interrupts. “I think the Ministry nabbed one of their herd from the first task. They are *pissed*.”

“Mr Scamander says their aggression against wizards is usually because we encroach on their territory. We should be fine if we stay out of their space,” Amelia says.

Harry points at her. “That. I vote for doing that.” He pulls a bit of charcoal from the edge of the fire and summons one of the maps the others found at the bottom of their bags. It’s sparce on the details, but “The thestral herd is about here. Which puts centaur territory here.” He draws a line. He’s not sure about the border near Hogsmeade, so makes it extra generous.

Cedric levitates the fish to their plates. Harry’s plate used to be a rock, but he thinks it’s still sanitary. Probably. He didn’t think to ask McGonagall that exact question.

“So if we move we shouldn’t go into the forest. How about the far side of the lake?” Cedric asks.

“I could check it out. I didn’t get that far last night.”

“How much did you get done?” Roger asks, faux-casual. “Did you figure out your wand connection?”

“Yeah. The range is, er, substantial. Easily over a kilometre.”

Roger blanches.

Krum looks up sharply. “Their fort cannot be much further from here.”

“We’re fine,” Harry just has to get that out before anyone bolts. “It doesn’t work when I’m behind a concealment ward, which we are, or if I’m in my animagus form. If I always come and go as a bird, Riddle can’t follow me back here.”

There is a collective loosening of shoulders.

“I can’t go around as a bird whenever I’m outside the wards,” Harry warns them. “I’d need an ungodly amount of sugar.” And warming charms.

“I suppose, if you’re far enough before you transform, you’d only ever draw them away from camp,” Roger says, shoulders loosening. “That’s not so bad.”

“It works both ways,” Cedric says.

Roger is not ready to concede that level of optimism. “That means it’s a double-edged sword,” he grumbles.

“We could send Harry out to check if the Supremacists are nearby.”

“And run the risk of pointing them in our direction.”

“Only if Riddle happens to be paying attention at that exact moment.”

Harry cuts in. “As long as we don’t get too comfortable assuming they’re *not* around, because it isn’t foolproof.”

“Indeed,” Roger says, picking at the last of his fish around the bones. “We should also talk about the three-person limit. What it means for our alliance.”

Harry gets up. “Immediate problems first. Food and shelter.” He summons their dirty plates, blasts them with water, and scrubs viciously. Fleur looks at him oddly, but that’s fair, he supposes, when they will probably just transfigure new ones later. “An inconveniently deaf basilisk which may or may not be loose in here with us. Amelia, where would he hang out?”

“Er, they prefer a cool, damp habitat. He might visit the warmest areas to bask in the mornings but wouldn’t stay for long. He’d avoid snow – that’s too cold.”

“So we stick to the warmest area around the lake or the coldest part of the forest,” Hermione says.

“The forest is centaur territory. The lake has food. There is a clear winner,” Fleur says.

“Yes, and it will be crowded with champions looking for food and Supremacists looking for champions.”

“We’re assuming the basilisk is alive.”

“How would it be dead? *Why* would it be dead?”

“You saw what Black did to that Cerberus. And think about it – do dead basilisk heads still have their powers, like Medusa? Could they carry it around or hang it from their fort? Harness the gaze without risking getting eaten themselves.”

They turn from Amelia to Roger. Once creatures are dead, their bits and pieces fall under the expertise of potioneers. “I… have no idea. Maybe? I’d say it could *at least* paralyse.”

“That’d be a risky play for them. A lot of magical shields are reflective.”

“We should rig mirrors around the camp inside our wards, just in case.”

“If the lake is crowded, we could hang back a bit without ending up in the forest. What’s the summoning range for fish?”

Most of them are distracted by this tangent. Roger is not.

“I just want to know where we stand,” Roger tells Harry, eyebrow raised in challenge. He glances at Hermione arguing with Fleur over

the map. The movement catches Cedric's attention. "Only three can go through to the next task. The Ministry don't usually do that. It changes things."

Harry levels him with a flat look. "Not yet it doesn't. There are still eighteen champions. Six Supremacists. Any group of three would be *slaughtered*. We only stand a chance united." Maybe he should look for Ganz and Penchev–

"Seventeen. Five," Cedric says.

"What?" they ask simultaneously. Harry is already summoning the list.

"Gauthier died before you two woke up," Cedric says.

"I wonder how," Harry murmurs.

"I guess he didn't get his hands on a wand and didn't have the sense to run," Roger says.

Harry can see it – Bellatrix declaring that if Gauthier isn't going to be useful, he will be fun. Harry winces. His death was likely crueller than anything in the first task. At least the creatures only wanted to eat them.

The line through Gauthier's name is perfectly straight. Soon there will be more. Görder and Trelawney's names stare accusingly, and Cedric catches him looking. Amelia snuggles into Cedric's side with a sniff. It's an improvement from her blank staring.

"We spoke about Trelawney and Görder last night. Trying to find a new way to move forward once the adrenaline wore off. You can too, as often as you need," he says earnestly. "We've got your back."

"Thanks, Cedric. I'll take you up on that."

"Look!"

Harry is on his feet in an instant.

Fleur is pointing not out into the tunnel to the grounds, but at a small gold symbol on the map. "It just appeared – a treasure chest."

"Well," Hermione says what they're all thinking. Gifts from the gamemakers don't come for free. "That's a trap."

Harry tilts his head and guesstimates distances. "Yep, smack in the

middle of the acromantula colony."

"But more supplies?" Roger tentatively perks up. "Better supplies?" He glares at the paltry offering of potions ingredients in the corner.

"You'd hope so, if it was worth fighting a whole nest of acromantulas," Cedric shudders.

They stare at the map, all except Fleur, who is paling as she watches something the rest can't see. Cedric switches his concern from the map to her.

"I'm not sure it's worth the risk," Hermione says. "But we have to decide now. If we're going, we need to get there before the Supremacists camp on it and boobytrap it to high heaven."

"It could be worth it just to stop the Blood Supremacists from getting it," Harry says. He raises his hands at the look Hermione turns on him. "I don't like not knowing what's in there. Weapons. Potions. Heck, it could be a stash of brooms. They could wreak havoc if they get something like that."

There is a beat of grim silence.

"What if we destroy it from a distance? That way we'll be safer but still prevent the Supremacists gaining an advantage," Harry tries to compromise.

Krum thinks about it. "We would still have to enter the acromantula colony to destroy it."

"If we do that, we might as well try to collect the loot," Cedric says.

"Is there any harm in scouting?" Roger asks after a moment. "We could make our way over while you two fly ahead to see if you can just grab it or if it's worth more effort trying to collect or destroy. If you can't even get close, then we won't risk it."

Harry remembers a lot of webs from second year. Acromantulas hunt anything that crosses their path, including birds, but he's confident in their flying abilities.

"How are you, Hermione? Up for it?"

"I'm fine," Hermione says. then, with the grudging admittance she can never shake when she isn't top of the class, adds, "Better than last

night. Fleur is an excellent curse-breaker."

Fleur looks down. "Ah, thank you."

He meets Krum's eyes. There's only steely determination in them.

Harry nods, "We're game. Can you give me a warming charm? Ta." He'd like disillusionment too, but the last thing he needs is to bump into Krum and send them both careening into a web.

Harry stretches and shakes his limbs out, and by then, there is a handsome falcon preening his wings. Harry decides that he is awake enough not to fly into anything. He transforms and does a few loops to be sure.

Krum bobs his head, tracking the movement. His talons flex.

Harry recalls that falcons specialise in hunting other birds, and he is suddenly much more awake. He hovers in front of Krum.

They shouldn't. They have a job to do.

Harry darts forward, feints left, and rockets out the tunnel and between the willow branches. There's a rush of feathers as Krum streaks after him.

The job can wait one minute.

Krum is more manoeuvrable than a broom, but Harry is smarter than a snitch and he can fly backwards, sideways, and upside down.

Harry stalls and spins into a loop, dodging a swipe by a hairsbreadth. Krum lets out a delighted shriek.

Harry chitters and tries a cheeky swoop over Krum's shoulder. Krum does an aerial roll and Harry has to pump the breaks and dodge because it turns out Krum can fly upside down too, if only briefly.

The willow shudders and stops swatting at them.

"Harry!" Hermione sounds worried. She has her wand out, and right, she probably can't tell if they're playing or if their instincts have gotten out of hand.

Harry zips down to her. He lands on her offered arm, almost slipping on the smooth scales of her jacket. He chirps happily.

Krum lands next to him. Krum leans away, and Harry eyes him in confusion, but then Krum's leg shoots out and taps him.

Harry fluffs up into a ball of indignation.

Hermione snorts, and it seems to catch her by surprise because she tries to hide it a moment too late behind her hand.

Harry gets fluffier. He turns slowly, laying accusing beady eyes on her, and Hermione gives up holding in her laughter.

Harry looks almost double his size, which he knows is not intimidating in the least, because it's making his wings stick straight out and he just looks like a child smothered in too many winter coats, if that child was a puffskein.

Krum is chuffing too.

Harry waddles up Hermione's arm and hides in her hair. If he was a little taller, he'd stick his beak in her ear. See if she's laughing then.

"Sorry, Harry," Hermione giggles. "Come out, I'll get you with that charm before you freeze. We'll wait near the edge of the valley for your word. Send red sparks to call a retreat."

The warming charm goes a long way to earning his forgiveness.

Krum calls for Harry and then he takes off. Harry battles his way out of Hermione's hair and follows. Krum knows vaguely where they're going but Harry quickly takes the lead as they go beneath the canopy.

They drop into the valley and not long after, they see the first web. Light glints off strands in the corner of their eyes, one after another, until strands form sheets and then layers so thick it starts to block the last weak light from above. There is movement; the occasional shift of a hairy leg under an overhang, eyes glinting in the shadows.

If they fly much deeper, there will be no light for the acromantulas to avoid. Harry lands on a branch briefly to check his wand response – it does not show Riddle nearby or detect any unsavoury traps.

His ears pick at a crackle that could be leaves underfoot or the click of mandibles. That is his cue to leave. Harry shrinks back down and zips over to where Krum is keeping watch. They continue.

Krum spots it first – he calls a quiet alert.

Harry stops on a dime, letting the momentum topple him into a somersault so he is looking back at Krum. The falcon veers off, tucking in his wings to fit between two webs. Harry races after him and sees it – a small chest sitting on a dark wooden table in a clearing – or less a clearing than a pit at the base of silk skyscrapers. He recognises that tunnel. The Ministry have dropped the chest on Aragog's front door. From the low, agitated hum in the air, the acromantulas do not appreciate it. The snow around it is a churned, muddy mess. Harry does not want to know how many spiders it took to make all those footprints, even accounting for eight legs each. But the acromantulas could not reach the chest itself – a ring of pristine snow reveals there is some kind of barrier.

Harry can feel hundreds of eyes on them, but two small birds are not particularly interesting. Two warm-blooded humans landing, sending a shudder through the lattice of web covering the ground, however?

The forest falls entirely silent.

"*Homenum revelio*," Harry murmurs. No one but Krum. "Clear. Quickly," Harry says, and turns to the chest as Krum paces a quick circle, laying his own wards. "Most spiders will drop from above." If his nightmares are accurate, they could be overrun in seconds once they decide to coordinate.

Harry fires rapid diagnostics. The chest was portkeyed in via the table, which could be a sign the contents are magical and wouldn't play nice with the enchantment if they had to use a proxy. He starts dismantling the deadlier protections. There is a paralysis ward on it – nasty – anchored into the lid, and at first it looks like he has dispelled it correctly, but that was a decoy. The anchor is behind a tricky little nullification rune, which is itself inside the paralysis ward. So that's going to be interesting to access.

Harry knows what to do, in theory. He once saw Riddle simultaneously access two parts of a runic key on both sides of a locked bunker door. But it took Harry several more weeks of study after the fact to recognise what he did, and the length of time was only slightly protracted by intrusive thoughts *a la* Riddle's clever fingers. He did not need the lessons to tell him it is difficult – it took Riddle an hour to solve. *Riddle*.

A series of thuds let him know he is not going to get that hour.

"Can you do remote rune work?" Harry asks.

Krum swears, which is answer enough. Or could also be because a dozen acromantulas the size of horses are rappelling down. Their silk ropes remain, slowly filling the space with sticky flight risks.

Krum's wards won't hold for an hour against a swarm. They won't even hold long enough to anchor them properly.

"Either we get this out of here, somehow, and let Fleur have a crack at it, or we torch it."

Krum fires a shrinking charm at the chest. It bounces off.

"Nullification," Harry tells him.

Krum turns his wand back to the forest. There is no point trying opening charms. Any curses dark enough to overpower the nullification would blow it to smithereens, which is still an option.

"It is too big and heavy. I cannot fly with it."

Harry steps toward the tunnel. Krum aims his wand at the rhythmic thuds from within. Harry waves him toward the chest instead. "See if you can make the table levitate. I'm going to try something."

"What?"

"Diplomacy." Maybe they can still fly it out of here. They certainly won't be running – they'd have to go through a hundred spiders in any direction except by air. "Hello Aragog."

Legs each long enough to span his dorm room emerge. The smaller acromantulas circling Krum's barrier shrink back – out of respect or fear, Harry isn't sure. But the longer Aragog takes to crawl out and sic the hoard on them, the more time they have to work.

Krum conjures ropes but the chest doesn't budge. He aborts this latest attempt in favour of a shield, which, fair – Aragog is big enough to push through the wards if he cared to. He is blind and he moves like he's made of creaky hinges, but if he was really that helpless, his offspring would've eaten him by now.

But the shield isn't necessary yet. "He'll talk first," Harry says.

Krum goggles at him. "They can *talk*?"

"This one can." Evidently, they're intelligent enough to pick up a language if a special type of person spends years chatting to them.

How Aragog actually speaks with those mouthparts, Harry is less clear on.

“You think we can talk our way out?”

“Not a chance.”

“Ah,” Krum realises.

Harry is stalling.

“I recall your scent,” Aragog says. Krum eyes Harry incredulously but turns his focus back to the chest. “Why do you return, Friend of Hagrid?”

Other than to retroactively earn all the detentions he got away with the first time, plus interest? Snape will be having a conniption.

“The Blood Games. Do you know what that is?”

“I do. Your tournament has come to these forests twice before in my lifetime.”

The schools take turns hosting, so that pushes the date back to the fifties. Merlin. No wonder Aragog looks to be on his last legs.

“That must be, err, pretty disruptive for you.”

“It is a boon. The forest overflows with new tastes. A reliable glut of food means we can hatch many more young, and trust that the food will arrive to sustain them.”

Fangs sinking into Trelawney’s –

Harry sinches the tourniquet of his occlumency down tighter.

“Sounds like you know about the new creatures. Maybe I don’t need to warn you about the basilisk, then.”

The acromantulas flinch back. “You speak its name!”

“Sorry,” Harry says innocently and crosses his fingers. “I thought Hagrid would want me to warn you, since this hasn’t happened before. The gamemakers don’t often lose an entire, uh, you-know-what. Hagrid would want you to be safe. And hide. Far away from here.”

“We feel the wards. We are trapped.”

“Then lay low. Don’t go out hunting. We’ll run and draw any attention away from you.”

“I think not! You are bigger this time, Friend of Hagrid. You will feed more of my children.”

Harry sighs. “Yeah, I figured.” He backs into Krum. “So are we taking or destroying the chest?” He does not even float the idea of returning with the others. They wouldn’t make it in and out on foot without fiendfyre clearing the way, which would be only marginally less suicidal.

An acromantula pounces from above. The barrier holds. Its legs span the ward, caging them in as fangs score the barrier, dripping venom.

“One moment,” Krum lifts the table by the leg. It hovers by his head. “There. I do not know if it will be manoeuvrable enough.”

Harry glances at the dangling silk strands, the acromantulas leaping through them like the worst Halloween party poppers. Next time, they should bring a backpack to shove it in. Stupid oversight, but nothing they can do about it now. “Worth a shot.”

He overpowers a stunner into the acromantula’s vulnerable belly. The legs curl up and it rolls off, bowling through its offended siblings. The agitated clicking turns into a ground-shaking rattle. “Go! I’ll cover you until you’re clear.” He reaches to steady the table by another leg.

A hook snags Harry’s navel.

Ah, shit.

Krum’s eyes meet Harry’s in the instant before they’re sucked into swirling colour.

The landing is nothing like any portkey Harry has taken before.

He can’t see. He can’t tell up from down. Maybe the world is still spinning. He lashes out but he hasn’t hit anything solid yet, but his limbs feel heavy, he can’t even feel Krum or the table or the chest with its paralysis ward so he should really stop thrashing but he can’t draw a breath. There is a crushing weight on his chest, like he appeared in the basilisk’s coils or inside a dragon’s throat, and it forces the air out in a stream of bubbles.

He realises what that means just as the water forces its way in, pressure like a jet into his nose and mouth.

He manages to slather a bubble-head charm over his face despite his body wracking with coughs – the first sucks in more water, but the second thankfully hacks it up into air. Blindly, he digs his wand into his ribs and spells his airways clear.

His nose and throat burn. It's freezing. The warming charm doesn't carry across transformations. The first thing he does after warming himself is cast a night-vision charm. Not a lumos. He must be hundreds of metres below the surface of the lake. He does not want to draw the attention of every light-sensitive creature looking for a meal. But all he sees is more nothing.

He wonders if he did the charm wrong, until he looks over his shoulder and sees a mouth full of rows and rows of sharp teeth.

The slow drag of his wand arm against the water is the only thing that stops Krum getting blasted before Harry notices the human arms and legs attached.

"You gave me a heart attack!" Harry says. "Where's the damn chest?" He did not brave Aragog's spawn and the Ministry's nasty wards and their stupid portkey which was a *trap* instead of how they got it into the arena (Moody was right about making assumptions but Harry knows who the bigger ass is in this situation) just to let it sink to the bottom of the lake.

Krum shrugs and points up. If he altered the buoyancy to get it floating in air, it would've shot up like a cork.

Which would not be a bad act to follow, because the gamemakers did not rescue them from acromantulas; they decided the frying pan wasn't hot enough and punted them into the fire.

Harry spins around but there is just water in all directions. He doesn't know what's in here with them, so it is definitely time to go.

He raises his wand and holds on for dear life. "*Ascendio*."

Water flows past him, faster and faster. It threatens to peel his clothes off, if not his skin. He squints into the stream in case the portkey deposited them in an underwater cave, and he needs to abort. The water lightens to a murky grey, he passes startled fish, a swarm of grindylows. There is movement – something closing in on all sides. He

catches a glimpse of pale flesh tones, but he's nearing the surface and has to squeeze his oversensitive eyes shut against bright light.

The momentum carries him far into the air. He transforms as soon as he feels the breeze, shakes out his wings and scatters droplets into a crystal haze.

A splash heralds Krum's arrival. He cuts it a lot closer to falling back in because he must reverse the shark transformation before he can take his falcon shape, but swoops out of the fall at the last moment, skimming the surface and dodging a hand that breaches out of nowhere to snatch at him. Harry whirls around and glimpses a pale green face before it sinks too deep to make out more than a blob, and even that disappears.

Harry and Krum rapidly put more distance between themselves and the surface, and that's where they find the blasted chest, hovering serenely in midair. They fly to the bank, instead. It isn't far – they're closer to the boat shed than the centre of the lake.

Harry lands on the pebbled beach, transforms beside Krum, and stumbles anew under his waterlogged form. The forgotten night-vision charm sears his eyeballs for a minute. "Ugh!"

He is *not* taking his armour off, so begins the painstaking task of drying himself with magic.

Krum does not. Draining like a waterfall, he says, "I am faster. I will get the others before they go too far into the forest."

"Brilliant," Harry says with relief.

"Guard the chest."

Harry nods and Krum disappears in a few wing beats.

The stupid chest still hangs above him. He'll lasso it or something. In a minute. He flashes a two-fingered salute at it. *Bloody gamemakers think we're helpless out of our element? Think again.*

Once Harry's knees stop trembling enough to walk, he lays a circle of invisibility, repulsion, and protection wards.

A combination of wind and rope bring the chest to him. Harry anchors it firmly and turns his wand alternatively between the lake, whatever it contains, and the trees which could be hiding Supremacists –

although his wand doesn't show Riddle is close, it's no guarantee – or dementors because that's how his day is going. Nothing jumps out to fight. So he waits.

And waits.

And waits for the hammer to fall.

At the first sign of movement, he almost hexes Cedric. He lowers his wand, feeling like he went back to the spiders for round three. He just wants to go back to sleep.

Harry dozes a bit while Fleur cracks the chest open a few hours later to reveal dinner. It'd be a feast for one person, but for seven it doesn't go as far. They have enough vegetables to last them two, maybe three days. It's an underwhelming reward for the effort it required, but what can they do – strike and starve? They aren't the Supremacists with their surplus of sponsor gifts.

…

Harry can't sleep. He should be able to. He is safe. Hermione is on watch – nothing will get past her. He ate enough that his stomach is no longer gnawing at his intestines. It's late, he's physically exhausted, and mentally drained. His brain shouldn't have the energy to replay recent highlights of his life, but it just refuses to switch off.

His sleeping bag abruptly feels too tight, the tunnels too dark, and he breathes out shallowly against the phantom weight on his chest. He presses his back into the hard floor – he's not in the lake, he's being stupid. The tunnels are reinforced, they won't collapse and fill his lungs.

He crawls free, enviously steps over his sleeping allies, and stumbles toward fresh air.

A red fox is laying in the entrance. One of her keen ears flicks back and she transforms.

"You should be sleeping," Hermione says.

"Tell me about it," Harry grumbles. He flinches when the breeze picks up. For a second, the creaking bark and rustling leaves sound like he's back in the acromantula hollow.

It's just the Willow. Harry pops his head out next to hers to prove it,

but he sees the stars – *draco – "I told you so!" – possible punctured lung – spiders closing in – venom dripping into Krum's eyes –*

Harry rubs his forehead. That didn't even happen.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't stop thinking about Trelawney."

"Me either. Or Görder. Mainly Görder – it was my plan that failed her." The confession surprises him. Hermione always looks like she's holding it together.

He hugs her. "We tried."

Hermione sighs. "I'm fine during the day but…"

It's the quiet moments. Harry knows. "I don't get it. I could handle it when there were a hundred acromantulas *right there*." Why can he see nothing but fangs *now*?

He clenches his fists. "I can't focus." He needs to. Distraction is deadly.

"Focus fatigues. It's like a muscle. You can't keep a tight grip forever."

Lying on Riddle helped the last time Harry's occlumency couldn't. He can't do the same with Hermione – he'd squish her – so he snuggles next to her instead. The thoughts don't leave, but they feel less like they're going to sweep him away with them.

"She wanted to tell me something." A prophecy. He was ready to listen. "I should've started listening earlier."

"Harry, I don't think her predictions were much to go off."

He doesn't disagree. Trelawney said he won't recognise his worst fear, but what could that even mean – he'll encounter a dementor in disguise? She said something about Bellatrix suffering a terrible fate – promises, promises, but not actionable intelligence. Another unhelpfully vague warning was to be careful with secrets because a secret may turn the tide, but at least that prediction came with a suggestion.

"That's not the point." Even if the predictions aren't useful, even if he disagreed with what she said, listening is respect that everyone deserves. People are more than the use you can extract from them.

Hermione hums noncommittally. “She predicted a lot of things. If only half of them come true, you should be dead several times over already, more than once by fire.”

He frowns. “I only remember one. Wasn’t that when she mentioned the dragon?”

“The dragon was fatal breath, not fire breath. I’m not counting it.” Hermione bites her lip. “I was, perhaps, too harsh with her for referencing the Hobbit. Since she wasn’t entirely wrong about the dragon.”

Harry’s eyebrows shoot up. “Trelawney read novels?” He has never seen her read three consecutive pages of any book, preferring to flick through for the more auspicious page numbers.

“I – hmm.”

Still, a Hobbit reference isn’t ringing bells. “What did she say, exactly?”

“That there is a terrible shadow over your future. With the power of a hurricane, it breathes death.”

An embodiment of a calamity, a force of nature – he can see how that would fit a dragon better than any other creature. But – “Terrible shadow,” Harry frowns. That’s not how it felt to face the horntail. It could’ve been worse. It could still be worse, if the Gamemakers throw another dragon in this task and it drops in on their camp out of the blue. The horntail was a brief respite, if anything; he was so focused on surviving the task that it took his mind off the looming promise of the end of the Games. The end feels more like a terrible shadow. “I’m not sure the horntail was the right dragon,” he says slowly, “If she was predicting a dragon at all.”

Hermione scrubs her hands over her face, then her hair, where her fingers get tangled in her curls. “I do not see the point. If divination cannot give us a date and time or at least tell us what we’ll run into eventually, what good is it?” she tugs waspishly to free her hands. “What use is a vague bad feeling?”

“I don’t know.”

Harry can’t think of any predictions that have helped him. They only make sense in hindsight. He got in trouble for entering the duelling ring against Bellatrix. Umbridge did use his weakness, his need to

protect his friends, against him. Trelawney also predicted he would discover a terrible betrayal, and a month later he figured out Pettigrew played Lily and James twice over, first by revealing the con Snape and his parents pulled over the Gamemakers, and then selling out the Order of the Phoenix members to Grindelwald.

But did Trelawney mean *that* particular backstabber? There will be no shortage of them now that they're in the arena and at most three can make it out. Maybe she covered all bases, because she did also predict he'd be betrayed by someone he doesn't trust and that could be anyone bar Hermione and maybe Krum. It would have to be someone on his side, though – being attacked by Bellatrix would be par for the course, not treachery. The biggest shock would be Cedric or Amelia, because that should be against some fundamental law of the universe, or if ranked by pain then Krum hurting Hermione.

Harry's stomach abruptly wants to eject itself through his throat. He grapples the fear down. No, he can't let it rule him. He'll keep the warning in the back of his mind because there's no shoving this back into Pandora's box, but he refuses to let it dictate his behaviour. That's how too many of these things become self-fulfilling prophecies.

But then, what about *the* prophecy – the one Dumbledore mentioned, and the one Trelawney brought up? He doesn't even know if they're different or the same. What happens to fate if a seer dies before she shares it; are they still treading a preset path in a deterministic universe, but the path is invisible, or is it freeing, or is the lack of forewarning simply part of what sets fate on its course?

Harry has no one to bounce the questions off. He aches to talk to Tom. Hermione would only get more frustrated. Fleur might've been interested in divination, but these days she blanches at the first hint of Trelawney. He wishes he'd tried to get more information out of Dumbledore; he shouldn't have gotten distracted by Pettigrew's escape. He could ask if he survives the Games but by then it might be too late – Trelawney seemed to think it was urgent.

Harry sighs. This is not helping him sleep. He starts counting stars, but there are clouds rolling in and he falls abysmally short of numbing his brain. "Hercules and draco are linked, aren't they?"

"In some sources, yes, draco is Ladon, the dragon who guarded the golden apples that Atlas picked while Hercules held up the sky. Ladon might've also been killed by Hercules, depending on the telling. But draco has been attributed to many different dragons."

“And serpens?”

“Not related to Hercules, rather to Apollo and Delphi to the Greeks, and to the healer Asclepius to the Romans. Asclepius is thought to have been a historical wizard, you know? The myth says he revolutionised herbology after seeing a snake resurrected.”

Serpens, Hercules, draco. Resurrected snake, mightiest hero, guardian dragon. Harry catches a glimpse through the clouds, and he can still picture Riddle among them, cradling stars in his palms, shaping fog with his fingers.

Harry closes his eyes, and he is transported back there, watching Tom sit in awed silence through the sunset when Harry showed him the sky.

Ambush

Chapter Summary

In which an ambush is planned and carried out.

Chapter Notes

Heads up, this one ends on a bit of a cliffhanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What is that?” Krum asks.

Harry looks up. He spies a flash of gold on a cord around Hermione’s neck. He’s not sure when she summoned it from the castle – she wears it more openly than she ever dared under Umbridge’s eyes, but it is still only visible now as she leans over a map. Hermione pulls it out, lets it hang defiantly on top of her shirt.

“Ah, your ring,” Krum says. “May I?”

“Yes,” she unclasps the necklace but grumbles in frustration.

“Let me,” Krum helps untangle it from her hair. “Is it the one from your…? It is beautiful.”

Harry’s eyebrows leap to his forehead.

Hermione smiles proudly. “He made it himself. I still haven’t entirely figured it out.”

“Remarkable. It is very well done. There are runes on the inside? They are so fine!”

Well. Hermione and Krum got a lot closer on Harry’s week away than he’d realised, if she told him about that incriminating link to felony larceny.

“It looks just like I imagined.”

“I cannot believe I’ve met someone else who read The Silmarillion.”

“Not well enough to quote it.”

“Still. I wouldn’t have thought you were a fantasy fan.”

“I read many different things. The mind cannot always be racing in the clouds. It is important to slow down.”

“How on earth do novels calm your mind? They are new universes to explore!”

Cedric tilts his head closer to Harry and murmurs, “I can’t decide if it’s humanising or disillusioning.”

“Hmm?”

“That one of my favourite quidditch stars is such a nerd,” he grins ruefully. “My dad said I wasn’t good enough to go pro because I didn’t have the dedication to spend all my time training.”

The same dad that expected Cedric to get top grades and be Hufflepuff captain and prefect, and gave Cedric so much grief over missing head boy that it took until October for him to really smile. The more Harry learns about Amos Diggory, the less he likes him.

A sudden change from fervent gibberish about elves –not house elves– and dwarves –not like gnomes– and goblins –no, Harry, not quite like our goblins, same teeth though– to soft appreciation catches Harry’s attention.

“A lot of care and effort made this,” Krum says warmly. “He cares about you very much. I hope I will meet him.”

“He’d love that. He and his brother are mad quidditch strategists, they admire your plays. They won a fifty-to-one bet on you in the world cup. It jumpstarted their careers, funded this sort of experimentation.”

“Really?”

“One minute I think he’s interested,” Cedric says, “the next it seems like he just wants an introduction to her boyfriend.”

If that’s the right word for Fred and Hermione’s relationship, it’s only because it’s the middle ground. On one hand, they didn’t want to officially start dating until after the Games, on the other, they might be halfway engaged. Mrs Weasley is going to box Fred’s ears if she figures it out, and then cook a feast.

But then Harry registers the rest of Cedric’s words. Stops to really think about it. “You know, it could be both.”

With a scuff of boots on dirt, Roger steps into their room, straightening from the stooped posture the tunnel forced him into. Hermione's bluebell flames provide enough light for Harry to notice his mood darken. "Well, I hope lounging around gossiping means you're well rested," he says. His eyes narrow where Krum and Hermione are huddled over her ring. "Granger, it's your watch. Krum, why don't you help me dry the herbs? Potter – weren't you supposed to be scouting today?"

"After lunch." Roger knows full well that Harry had the midnight watch and has only just woken up. And when he did, the first thing Cedric told him was that Fleur noticed Supremacists wandering around more than usual on her dawn shift. Harry frowns. "Unless new information makes it more pressing?"

Roger just huffs. "And who is preparing lunch? You can't expect me to do all the cooking as well as the brewing."

Hermione casts, "*Tempus*. Oh." She puts her necklace back on, shrinks, and scampers out on silent paws.

"Sorry Roger, we'll get on it," Cedric says. "We didn't realise it's almost noon."

"See that you do," he says, and stomps back out. Krum is quick to follow.

Yikes. Maybe Harry will go scouting early. "Did something happen this morning?"

"No," Cedric says.

"Really? That was not normal wrong-side-of-the-bed grouching. He's been acting like he's jealous or something."

"I suppose he is, in a way."

Harry raises an eyebrow.

"On paper, you and Hermione have the best chance of getting into the third task. And well, of the rest of us, it doesn't seem like he'd be the one you'd choose to take with you."

"This *again*?"

Cedric shrugs apologetically. "Krum and Hermione have gotten quite

close, and he's a powerhouse in his own right."

Harry hums. Roger was quick to abscond with Krum, but something niggles at his mind. "So what? Cedric, *we're* close."

"Yeah, and he's been snippy with me too."

"Suppose I'll have a word with him," Harry sighs. Better to nip the problem in the bud. But not before Roger has cooled off a touch. "And what about you?"

"What about me?"

Harry stares.

Cedric dips his head. "I'm not worried you're picking favourites."

"Well, that's true enough," Harry says with grim amusement. There's no point. He has favourites. He has priorities. He's not sure he has it in him to choose to leave people behind. "So what is it you are worried about?"

Cedric is silent for a long moment. "We'll have to split the alliance at some point. To be honest, Harry, I don't think there is a way it can end peacefully."

"We could just go our separate ways."

"And wait for each other to die. Survival of the fittest, hey?"

"Hmm."

"Harry?"

Harry wonders how Boutin is doing, sometimes. He healed the erkling poison at the start of the task. He wonders if he'd have done the same if Boutin was the fourth champion standing between Harry and his friends winning. Probably. "I must be daft," he mutters. "Cedric, if we split up, and you're in trouble, you can count on me."

A pause. "You might be a bit daft," Cedric says. "Krum, I could understand. He earnt your loyalty – he saved Hermione. You owe him."

"I *know* him," Harry corrects. "He is a good person. He is worthy of respect and trust. Trust would be the first to go. But respect? That's solid. I like and admire you too. Very much. There's not a lot you

could do to change that."

Cedric tilts his head. "How about try to kill you?"

"You've got as much right to fight for your life as anyone else."

"And if I tried to kill Hermione and everyone else? My father fully expects me to be a victor, you know."

Harry side-eyes him. "Aiming to be a sole victor – killing people who don't need to die just for approval and prize money – that'd be a different story. There's nothing admirable in that."

"I was taught that survivors were selfish. Dishonourable. Weak."

"What do you believe?" Harry asks. He isn't afraid of the answer.

"Loyalty is nothing to be ashamed of."

Harry jostles him. "Hufflepuff."

"Gryffindor," Cedric elbows him back, then drops his arm over Harry's shoulders. "Getting your nobility everywhere."

Harry huffs. It's just as well he's still got nobility because he doesn't feel like he has much by the way of bravery to recommend him anymore. He knows what's coming and how much it's going to hurt. He's going to try to keep them all alive. He can't succeed.

…

Harry circles the Supremacist fort. It's set on a hill, in the open. They can see for miles around but aren't at risk of being cursed from afar because whatever structure they've set up is behind several overlaping layers of solid stone parapets. Harry can't even get a close look at their defences, or possible weaknesses, before he runs into an imperturbable ward.

In a second, Harry transforms to check his wand – no heading – and gets back in the air again. Riddle is either far away or inside their wards. That's inconvenient. Harry wants to know what they're doing around their base, and he certainly can't get in to listen to their plotting.

The wards flicker sooner than he'd expected and Mazet exits at a run. The wards almost close on Romanov, following more slowly.

Harry hovers at the range of his hearing. Glee turns to suspicion, and then downright alarm, as they head to a familiar, innocuous spot.

It's the place where he transformed.

Romanov looks around. "Well, what do you know – there's nothing here!"

"I'm telling you I saw something. There was a blip."

"A blip! I am so relieved we sat around all day staring at a map instead of hunting. Merlin forbid I miss a blip!"

"Off you go then – run around until you bumble into an invisible body! It will spare me your whining."

Romanov snarls. Mazet ignores him, summoning an ordinary stone to examine the underside.

"You must have made this one too sensitive," Romanov says.

"There is nothing wrong with it."

"There clearly is, since your little security line is jumping at shadows."

"Security, pah! You have no vision. Imagine when this spans the entire arena? They will not be able to move without our notice."

"How would someone only cross this line? They would have had to find and disarm a dozen to get this far. You're saying a body materialised at our front door and just disappeared?"

"Krum could have."

"If it was Krum, then he is long gone. I told you to make it more sensitive."

"And chase after every fox, owl, and squirrel bigger than a falcon? A falcon, which, as you say, would be long gone? *Brilliant* plan, Romanov, just *exemplary*. I now know why we follow all of *your* ideas."

"Yeah, how are *yours* working? How many champions has it caught?"

"We wouldn't have found Ivankova otherwise!"

"Remind me how she died? Oh, wait!"

“That’s not on me!”

“Really? Then why did Black send you back to the fort while they fish her out of the lake?”

“Have you considered she recognises my work is important?” Mazet smiles sweetly. “Meanwhile, you have been doing… what, precisely? Our fort does not need a guard. You are not still recovering from Ganz’s little snare, I hope, it has been hours since your bits grew back.”

Their bickering only gets more bitter from there, but Harry is not lucky enough for them to snap and take each other out of the competition.

He doesn’t follow, in any case; he got the information he was looking for. The Supremacists are setting up some kind of detection grid.

The alliance is grim when he reports back.

“It sounds like a Runic Array for Detecting Active Range – RADAR,” Hermione says.

Fleur, who started packing when Harry started talking, calls over. “Yes, if that is how you call it in English.”

“A runic array?” Cedric grimaces. “Then, they only have to drop rune stones to expand it.”

“Yes.”

Needless to say, the vague plans the alliance had about moving get expedited.

The Whomping Willow tunnel was a good temporary measure, but there’s only one way out which could be problematic if, say, a basilisk sticks its nose inside as snakes are wont to do with small dark holes. The solution is to get as far off the ground as they can – a treehouse, naturally equipped with exits in any direction if one has a softening charm handy. But between the upset centaurs and acromantulas, no one is particularly keen on hiding it deep in the forest, and the forest edge is too close to the Supremacist fort, so to the far side of the lake it is. It won’t be quiet, but being close to the only consistence source of food is worth the increased risk of running into other hungry champions, or the Supremacists hunting them.

The tree house takes them most of the day to set up. Not the structure – they only need a small platform once Hermione works her magic to expand the inside of one of the tents, and to hollow out the trunk for a ladder – but the wards. This is not the quick fix they applied to the tunnels; it is a composite lattice from a clean slate, painstakingly interlocked like chainmail to make them stronger. It'd make Bill Weasley weep. And Harry doesn't get to help with any of it. Temporary wards would interfere with Fleur's work, and no wards means nowhere is safe to transform in case Riddle is nearby.

He has resigned himself to spending the entire day as a bird, draining his energy reserves to monitor the Supremacists just to check they aren't getting close to the alliance while they're exposed, when he realises he doesn't need to track them if they come to him.

And he hasn't run an obstacle course in ages, which is unacceptable, really.

…

Harry flies straight through the tent flap. His animagus form is enough proof of identity that Amelia doesn't raise the alarm. He almost bounces off a fabric wall – apparently, they have rooms now. At the back is a dedicated bedroom with enough space to accommodate six bodies and a bear. Nice.

And there is a dedicated hazards room, by the looks of it. Roger is stirring something into his improvised and highly substituted Blood Replenisher. He looks close to cobbling together something somewhat effective. At least, Harry thinks so; the mixture is red now.

And a kitchen! So they no longer have to lie next to the Devil's Snare cuttings which keep trying to strangle them in their sleep, *and* the belladonna and frog spawn are separated by three whole rooms from the parsley and fruit. What luxury.

Fruit. Sugar. Harry can *taste* it on the air.

He transforms without breaking stride and scoops up a handful of cherries.

"Hungry, Harry?" Hermione asks drying.

"Mhmm." He considers the stems, then eats them too.

"You look flushed," her eyes narrow.

“Being a nuisance is hard work.”

“What.”

“I shouldn’t tell you.” His lips quirk. “It’ll be bad for your blood pressure.”

“Well, now that you’re back, we’ve been talking – we need to plan the next steps.”

“Oh?”

“Just a sec!” Roger calls, “I’ve almost got this.”

Harry follows Hermione into the main room. Most of the alliance is already there. Lounges are set in a semicircle, facing a wall plastered with an oversized map which someone has been hard at work annotating, and one of the champion lists. A quick look shows no new deaths since Gauthier on the first night. Ivankova must’ve gotten away.

Harry expected far more deaths by now. He can see Bellatrix drawing things out, prolonging the hunt for fun, but Riddle – if he were on a tight schedule, there would be a dozen down already. At the very least, he is more than skilled enough to have killed Ganz and Penchev at the start, and could’ve done so without pissing off the pureblood elite. He must also be stalling. Harry just has no idea why.

Harry shakes his head. He eyes a plush chair suspiciously. “When that transfiguration reverts, what am I going to find myself sitting on?”

“A sleeping bag,” Cedric says.

Harry drops down beside him, assured he’s not going to bruise his tailbone.

“Done!” Roger says. “Come on in Amelia.” He eyes the space between Hermione and Krum, but sits next to Fleur instead.

Amelia ducks in the entrance, looking more lively than she has in days. “I’ve asked a bowtruckle to alert us if he senses any magic.”

“Huh. Maybe a sentry is overkill at this point,” Cedric says.

“Bowtruckles sleep too.”

“Right. Well. We’re stocked with potions. We have food, water,

shelter." Roger side-eyes Harry. "Now we need a strategy."

"Stay alive," Harry says.

"Be serious."

"I am. Rule one: don't die."

"The gamemakers won't be content with us just trying to survive." Harry is tempted to say where the gamemakers can stick their discontent, but Roger continues. "They're already taking countermeasures. Limited food. Limited number of survivors. Face it, they hold all the cards – they've forced us to play the game."

They're certainly trying, and it makes Harry want to dig his heels in even more. See how resolved the Ministry is months from now when the budget has blown out, and the public are bored watching them camping, and the French are sick of hosting the displaced Hogwarts students. There's nothing else he can do. The only way Harry is getting to the final three is if he fails to save more than half of his friends.

But Harry doesn't want to restart that argument. He scans their serious faces. "You all agree?" It is not really a question.

"Time is not on our side. Sponsors will keep the Supremacists fed and healthy. The longer this goes on, the weaker we'll get," Hermione says.

"We should bring the fight to them," Roger adds, bolstered by their agreement. "The gamemakers are going to make us fight the Supremacists. Either we do it on our terms or theirs. Are you going to help?"

Harry shifts uneasily. He can see they're determined. They already know they're risking their lives. He doesn't want to, but their chances will be far worse if they try without him. "What do you have in mind?"

"An ambush?" Krum suggests.

"We do outnumber them," Roger says. "We have the advantage."

Harry shakes his head. Roger thinks he knows what they're up against; they survived the bloodbath, after all. But at the bloodbath they were fighting to get away from enemies that weren't aiming to kill. If they

were, that curse that hit Hermione would've been bright green. Fighting to win – putting and enemy's back against the wall is a very different beast.

"It took four duelling trainers to take Bellatrix down, and that was while she was distracted by me," Harry says quietly. They stare at him. "Riddle is better."

Roger's mouth snaps shut.

"If we can take the rest of their group out first, *maybe* we can defeat those two. If we face the lot of them head on, it'll be a stalemate if we're lucky," Harry says. "Let's only pick fights we can win."

Any fight risks injury. If they lose anyone in the alliance, the next fight will be harder, and then it is a downward spiral. Picking unnecessary or fair fights is *stupid*.

"If you're right, then we need to whittle down their numbers," Roger says.

"But how?" Amelia asks.

"What if we don't face them all head on?" Cedric says.

"If we can get them to spread out, then strike fast, we could all gang up on one of them and then retreat," Hermione suggests. "You said Mazet and Romanov were alone."

"Yeah. Not anymore."

"Harry," Hermione says with a look she learned from McGonagall.

So Harry explains exactly what it means to be a nuisance, and how one can exploit a detection grid if one can, say, land in a location and transfigure several deer before repeating the feat ad nauseum.

Hermione has her head in her hands by the end of it, muttering about an utter menace. He was right about her blood pressure.

Harry shrugs sheepishly. It was fun. "Anyway. The Supremacist never travel alone, and very rarely in pairs. But they *will* split up to pursue multiple targets."

"So we divide them and take out one at a time until they are gone," Krum says.

Cedric hums. “Should we go after the strongest first, before they catch onto our strategy, and while we’re still strong, or…?”

“Or we take out the rest first and leave their best with no backup,” Hermione muses. “That would ensure we can focus on them without surprises.”

If Ron were here, he’d have something brilliant to add, but he isn’t so Harry does his best. “If Mazet is the driving force behind the radar, we need to take her out as soon as possible, and hope the rest of them don’t have the patience to finish her work.”

“It would disrupt Bellatrix and Stoeva too. The girls work too well together,” Krum says.

“Mazet, then,” Roger agrees.

“I don’t want to do it on their turf. It’s littered with traps.” Probably a lot more after his visit. “I’d make good bait. Riddle can find me. I can get them to a spot where *we* have the advantage. The trick will be making them think the alliance is scattered without giving away your positions.” He snaps his fingers. “Unless I’m not the bait, I’m the distraction! They know I’m not alone. If they find me, some of them will split off to search for you or our camp. Probably not Bellatrix, she wants my head on a pike, and I can hold Riddle’s attention. We set up some wards nearby, and while the rest are breaking into our supposed camp, you take down Mazet, and then we escape.”

Fleur is staring at him. Actually, they all are. Harry shrugs. “That’s the best I’ve got. Any other ideas? Unforeseen problems?”

“What if Mazet stays with you?” Fleur says.

Harry opens his mouth. Closes it. Valid. “I’ll try my best to kill her. You stay in position, target Stoeva. Or if she doesn’t show, Romanov.” He is a blunt instrument. Powerful, but more predictable than Stoeva or Bellatrix. Less resourceful than Mazet is turning out to be.

Cedric’s brow furrows with concern. “You’re sure the group won’t just kill you and move on together?”

Harry hesitates. He doesn’t think Riddle would be willing to share; he threatened to sic a basilisk on his allies the last time they suggested it. But Harry is never completely certain what Bellatrix will do, and Riddle’s behaviour in the arena hasn’t fit Harry’s expectations. It makes him nervous. “Bellatrix doesn’t want to grant me a quick death,

and Riddle wants to duel." That, at least, he is sure of.

"Riddle did try to toy with you at the bloodbath." Fleur wrinkles her nose. "And they won't want to lose us, to have to find us again."

Harry nods more confidently. "If the worst happens and they both attack and don't muck around, I can hold my ground for a few minutes. That's enough. Signal me and I'll fly away."

Hermione frowns. "If they start setting up an imperturbable ward…"

Harry wouldn't be able to fly out. "I'll take off at the first sign of one. We'll call it a day and think of something else."

"Right. Everyone move, we've got a fake camp to set up and boobytrap to high heaven," Hermione says.

…

Harry wanders in and out of the wards, his wand in his palm. It sits inert until he crosses the boundary, then it is determined to point southwest. Good. Riddle will get the same feedback; he'll know there are wards around, and since Harry plans to be found outside them, the Supremacists should start looking for a hidden camp.

Under the wards, one of their spare tents is empty, except for a pressure triggered rune as a welcome mat.

The others should be back by now from setting up a row of traps to stop pursuit on foot. Harry can't see them. They're all disillusioned, prepared to fight and run, but he trusts there's a ring of allies at his back.

Harry paces back outside the wards. He starts gathering firewood, checking his wand with every crouch. The heading doesn't waver – the Supremacists are coming straight for him. They can't be far now.

And that's when it all goes to shit.

A sudden splash has Harry almost jumping out of his skin. He's behind a shimmering shield dome before his feet hit the ground, whirling around to see – nothing.

Where are they? How did they sneak up on him?

The ripples peter out before they reach the shore. The lake is still.

Then a pale appendage rises out, and it's not the giant squid.

"Fuck," Harry says. "*Fuck*." Again, with feeling.

The surface boils. One breach turns into ten, a hundred, more. Knobbly spines and bony elbows, flailing through the water faster than they should.

The closest inferi seem to unfold from the knee-deep water, draped in pondweed, and they shamble up the bank.

"Abort!" Harry calls.

But his allies are disillusioned – he doesn't know if they've heard.

Harry transforms and flies the scant distance to their position, landing heavily and whipping out his wand, "Inferi! Run! *Homenum revelio*." There are six bright spots close by. One is *very* close – he almost landed on top of someone. "*Finite!*"

Roger appears with an indignant squawk.

Harry cuts it off. "And if you get buried in inferi and we don't even notice? No one gets left behind." But he's already squinting at the lights, trying to find which is smallest. "Amelia?"

Five bodies flicker into view. She is one of the last to appear, crouched behind a tree, eyes wide. Harry darts over to her.

The inferi have caught their scent. The corpses are spilling over the rocks, crashing through the bushes along the whole shoreline.

Harry growls, because there are another five dimmer points in his awareness as the revelio fades.

A flash. Harry ducks and a curse shoots over his head. There's a crack when it hits an inferius, its head snapping back in an impossible angle, but that hardly slows it down.

"Merlin help us," Roger says.

Pinned between inferi and Supremacists. Fucking gamemakers. That's what it must be, because even Potter luck isn't this bad.

"*Incendio!*" he casts. The first row of inferi fall just in time for the second to catch Amelia's fireball to the face.

Fleur makes it through the gap to them, aiming her wand over Harry's shoulder, "*Inflamare!*"

Surrounded already. They've barely made it a dozen paces.

The smell of burning flesh hits him over a haze of rot. It sticks to the back of his tongue.

"We get the others clear, then fly?" Krum shouts over the din as he and Hermione force their way through.

"Sounds like a plan!" Part of a plan. Perhaps an outline. Fuck it, they're improvising.

"*Incendio!* Shit! *Confringo!*"

Harry hears the whoosh of a fireball. He can feel the heat on his back. They aren't making progress. If anything, they're getting pushed back toward Cedric and Roger. Inferi are weak to fire, usually, but their skin is waterlogged, and there are so many.

Where did the Ministry get this many corpses?

Bellatrix's cackle splits the air. "Potter! Aw, you've found yourself a spot of bother."

Harry slams a very solid door in her face, raising the earth with such speed that it flings several inferi over their heads.

"Great – now it's *raining* corpses!" Roger says.

"Argh! *Depulso!*" Amelia flings one away.

"Oh, good catch," Harry says.

There are already skeletal hands visible, pulling themselves over the wall, and a muffled shriek from the other side. "Don't ignore me!"

Let her go around. The Supremacists will help take care of the inferi problem, and in the meantime, he can't catch a curse in the back.

Harry casts *revelio* again, hair standing on end because he doesn't have eyes on Riddle, and counts five Supremacists. Three are circling around. Bellatrix isn't. Oh no.

Harry turns his back on the inferi, hoping his friends can handle them alone, and gets a shield up just in time for the wall to explode in great

clods of earth.

Well, that didn't work.

Dust clouds the air, but his spell still shows her clearly. He whispers, mouth dry with grit, "*Avada kedavra.*"

Harry holds his breath as bright green streaks toward her. She sidesteps. He levitates the largest rocks and clods of earth, ready to intercept her response, ignoring the flashes of fire around him. But her answer is a cackle. The air swirls into a tornado, clearing the dust and ash, drawing the fire away from where it is needed. Hermione shouts as the inferi advance, but Harry can't turn. He has eyes on Bellatrix and Riddle. Her wild black hair is grey with ash. Riddle is spotless, his wand twirling idly between his fingers.

Bellatrix drops the tornado abruptly when she notices it is stripping brown leaves off a tree behind her. The tree was green a few seconds ago.

"Aww," she coos, "itsy bitsy Potter has shed his baby teeth." She grins with extra relish.

Multicoloured spells now intersperse the flames. Fleur and Krum are returning fire against Stoeva, Mazet and Romanov. Merlin, these people are *insane*, they should all be running. Amelia is gamely trying to cover them, but the inferi are advancing.

"*Protego diabolica*," Krum says, and an incoming curse is swallowed by black flames. He slashes his wand behind him, and the flames follow the motion, whipping out at Mazet, making her backpedal, and turning a swathe of inferi to dust.

Harry blasts the inferi on the other side without taking his eyes off Bellatrix. She times a crucio perfectly to drop a regular person. Even Harry barely gets his wand around in time to intercept. He keeps Riddle in his periphery. Still just watching. Why? Harry would've thought he'd barge to the front to demand his duel.

Bellatrix pouts. "What? No follow through for me? You'll never satisfy a girl if you've only got one shot in you."

If a surprise unblockable curse through dust didn't work, more spells certainly aren't going to when she's waiting for them. Harry wracks his mind for any viable attack. There isn't one. She has the edge at long distance, and he can't get closer without exposing his allies or

leaving himself vulnerable to hers. They are barely holding ground against the inferi; they can't spare enough spells to overwhelm Mazet, let alone Bellatrix.

Harry conjures platinum. He keeps the shield small, manoeuvrable.

Bellatrix flings a lazy bone-breaker his way. Non-lethal. She wants to play with her food. Or she bargained with Riddle – he'd let her have first crack, as long as she leaves Harry alive for Riddle to finish off? But that doesn't feel right. Riddle revels in a challenge, not picking over other someone else's scraps. He'd want to duel Harry at full strength. That's the difference between them – Bellatrix would kick Harry while he's down, Riddle would hand him a wand and tell him to get up and fight.

The bone-breaker curse is powerful enough to shatter silver, though, and Bellatrix startles a little when Harry's shield holds. She tries a more powerful spell, a nasty thing that vanishes tendons and leaves you immobile and helpless. When it bounces off her brows furrow.

Her third attempt turns an inferius inside out before it reaches Harry. Which is… hmm. Unconventional, as shields go. Harry switches from flame spells to knockback jinxes. More inferi surge into the gap between them, and while Harry doesn't have to block her curses, he has time to help Roger.

"Would you – ugh!" Bellatrix impatiently incinerates the inferi that try to strangle her. "Enough! Romanov, break up this party!"

Harry spins around to find himself facing a horn as long as his arm attached to a wrecking ball far taller than he is.

"*Impedimenta!*"

"*Reparifarge ani–*"

Spells bounce harmlessly off the rhino's hide. Clinging inferi do little to slow him down. He is upon them before Harry can try a second spell, allies leaping out the way – except Cedric. He ducks low, onto all fours, and as the rhino sweeps his head to fling Cedric aside, a grizzly bear launches into his exposed throat.

But a half-tonne bear merely slows down a two-tonne rhino, and only because their legs tangle as Romanov tramples him. Shaking his head, sinking his teeth in deeper, Cedric locks onto Romanov as they fall and slide.

Harry dives away, rolls, and comes up into the grasping arms of inferi. They've got grip like iron. He can't move his wand arm; the joint is threatening to come out of its socket and if he transforms it certainly will.

"Get off!" a wandless relashio flings them away long enough for Harry to burn himself some room, but they're so close, the hot embers flaking off them stick to his sweaty skin.

"Help!" Amelia is buried. He can barely see her through the mass of inferi.

"*Relashio!*" he casts, but more grab on. He can't destroy them without killing her, unless – "*Protego diabolica!*" Black flames wash over Amelia and the inferi. Not as extensive as Krum's whip, but functional. It leaves Amelia huddled, eyes squeezed closed, surrounded by smoking ashes, hungry flames looking for more more more –

"Dark magic from precious pure Potter!" Bellatrix crows. She folds over with laughter, but she straightens abruptly, and is lucky enough to get a scalping curse between the inferi. Harry gets the black flames in the way in time. He lets it have more power, grow bigger, moving to block a curse from Stoeva aims at Hermione while she breaks free of the inferi.

Bellatrix gives a feral grin. "Doesn't it feel good? That power. Such a *rush*, oh, and you're not used to it. Haven't you ever tortured something, Potter, held a dark curse nice and long? Animals make the funniest noises. There's nothing better. Except maybe little boys." She giggles. "Shall we find out?"

"Harry!" Hermione bumps into his back. "We can't get through!"

Bellatrix, Stoeva and Mazet are circling, fanning flames to keep them trapped with the inferi, raising the heat. Behind them, Riddle is watching– *learning*. He hasn't cast a single spell.

Harry spares a quick glance around, squinting and blinking as his eyes stream from the grit in the air. It's bad. Hermione is flagging. Roger and Fleur are now on their feet, but titans are wrestling between them. It's all anyone can do to keep out of their way, and scattered among the grasping hands of inferi, moving is not easy. Krum is keeping the inferi off by standing in his own circle of black flames, and it handily absorbs the curses the fire has cleared a path for. He is holding his own and covering Amelia, but that's with Bellatrix hardly trying and Riddle hasn't even started.

“Hermione, use the animagus reversal spell, if you can get a clear shot without risking Cedric,” Harry says. “Krum – intercept curses for everyone. Fleur – Supremacists. Roger, Amelia – keep the inferi off us.”

Harry moves his wand in a demanding arc and black flames bend to his will, creeping towards Krum’s fire. That’s one flank protected. If he can manage a full circle, they can clear the inferi out the middle and regroup. But the bigger the fire gets, the more there is that wants to spread. He tamps down on it, keeping a tight grip. It sinks to knee-high. The inferi simply step over it.

Bellatrix scoffs at his attempt. “Such control! You don’t even know how to use dark magic properly!”

She sends a stinging hex over the top.

A *stinging* hex.

Now, that’s just insulting.

But while she’s toying with them, she’s not hindering them. She still sees him as the boy that could only cast disarming and stunning spells in a duel. It’s brought him time, and he’s learning.

“Don’t trap us!” Roger calls as the flames cross his path.

Hermione almost takes Mazet’s arm off with a cutting curse, and she says impatiently, “Protego diabolica doesn’t burn friends.”

Yeah, Harry thinks, but only so long as he’s got control of it.

Bellatrix looks like she’s waiting for the flames to consume him, and when they don’t she goes from amused to pissed in the blink of an eye.

Harry can guess what’s coming. “I need help,” he says. He doesn’t dare relax his grip on the flames, unlike Krum who is managing to maintain his part of the ring of fire while casting curses. Harry is all too aware that there’s a line he could cross that will burn them all, but he doesn’t know where it is.

Hermione steps up to his side, shielding anything Harry can’t dodge. The protego fire is supposed to consume anything short of the killing curse, but the flames aren’t high enough. As it is, the inferi are doing a better job at blocking curses.

The earth shakes and their budding formation scatters again as Romanov rolls over, finally wrenching Cedric off. The rhino is bleeding, but not badly. He lowers his head and bellows. Cedric roars back, rising onto his hindlegs, towering above all of them, even Romanov. It's bluster. He'll come down on that horn any way Harry looks at it.

"*Reparifarge animagi!*" Hermione's blue spell hits Romanov on the shoulder, and that weight class matchup is now entirely unbalanced in the other direction.

Riddle tilts his head. Harry's attention is immediately on him, but Riddle soon captures most everybody's.

"Well, this has been illuminating. Excuse me Bella," Riddle says, barely audible under Cedric's roar as Romanov recoils. Bellatrix jumps to do his bidding. She prances aside and switches her attention to Cedric, exposed above the rest.

Riddle snaps his fingers and two lines of fire appear, clearing the inferi in a corridor between him and Harry. He flicks his wand and Cedric slams into a transparent dome instead of Romanov. "You're lucky you could yet be useful," Riddle says without even glancing his way. The disdain is palpable. The look he levels on Harry is very different. "I feel heat from your fire now. *Substantial* heat."

"Did you think you wouldn't?" Harry's neck prickles. His shield is too low. There are no inferi in front to block curses. He tries to levitate a rock with his left hand, but as his concentration wavers, the black flames flicker.

"No. But the degree does tell me something."

"And what's that?"

"Your recent wariness of me is not only subconscious. You actively see me as a deadly threat." Riddle tilts his head. "Even when I am not attacking, you think I still have that potential."

Harry's fingers flex around his wand. "You've always had that potential."

"And you've always known it. But I did not feel heat from this spell in training. You consciously, entirely put aside our political differences – our future."

“Now our present.”

“Indeed. And you can do the same to our history. Just put it all aside. You were right – you *are* good at compartmentalisation. Possibly *too* good.”

“Sorry if that’s inconvenient for you.”

“Quite the contrary. I worried you’d had a change of heart, you see. Either your feelings or your spirit.” He steps forward. “You ran from me. I thought you were just afraid of what I’d do to you, but that’s not it. You won’t run now, will you? Not while your friends are in danger. I’d *love* to see how you get out of it this time.” It’s a dare.

Harry narrows his eyes. “What are you saying?”

“Agree to duel me, and I will put pay to all this unpleasantness. Or get out of it on your own.”

“And then you’ll attack me anyway, I presume?”

“I merely want to see what you can do,” Riddle says innocently.

Which is neither a yes nor no. Or is it? Harry’s head leans one way, his gut the other.

Riddle waits for response, battle raging on around them.

Relying on Riddle is risky. Harry knows how to get them out; he is using the very spell. It can form fiery dragons and towering walls. Except it isn’t. Harry has something more akin to garden edging, and that’s not good enough.

One more try. Harry takes a breath. It’s a shield charm, they’re his speciality, he should be able to do it. He flicks his spare hand, trying to shape an offshoot by sheer willpower because that worked somewhat before. The fire fights him. It wants to spread, but on its own terms, not along the strict lines he demands.

“I believe this is the point I get to say I told you so,” Riddle says. His voice is honey smooth and slow, but his eyes are intent, anticipatory. “You can’t harness chaos. If you succeed, then it is not chaos.”

Chaos. Harry closes his eyes. The random movement of a snitch. No magic, not even divination, can predict where it will be at the end of the match. But there are still *rules*. It stays near the pitch. It is

movement with a clear goal: flee. A rule, but not a guiding hand. The thought is terrifying. Can he relax, even a tiny bit, when doing so could hurt them all?

Harry opens a crack. Immediately, the flame flare almost double in height until Harry clamps down on them in panic. Amelia shrieks, and they're still fighting but Harry can't spare the attention for where or who or how. He is rooted to the spot, adjusting to the feeling, so it's just as well the flames are now high enough to block curses.

And Riddle, he *grins*.

Hermione grabs Harry's shoulder and shakes him.

"No, I can do it," Harry realises. He knows how a snitch moves more intimately than any other animagus. He wasn't in direct control of the fire for that moment, but it did what he wanted. Connection without control. He opens that cage and thinks: *go, protect.*

The flames burst outwards, stretching until they snap, releasing a burning whip that sends Mazet diving for cover. Krum whoops and sends his own fire chasing after her. Harry bares his teeth. He spies movement and sends a more directed whip, but it's like trying to handle water – the tighter he closes his hands, the less he holds. Harry has to simplify things. He narrows the world down to black and white, friends and enemies, those he is shielding and what he is shielding against.

The next whip has antlers. It plunges into the trees and Harry hears Bellatrix swear, immediately drowned out by Riddle's delighted laughter.

A huge dog emerges from the flames at Harry's side and clears Cedric in a single bound as he prowls around Romanov, waiting for the instant Riddle will drop his shield and either unleash a rhino in their midst or cut his losses. The dog lunges at the inferi around Amelia with no concern for the legs it bowls through. Inferi vaporise as the dog snaps its jaws around them.

In moments, the battered alliance can stand back-to-back.

"Where is Mazet?" Fleur calls.

"Dunno. Dead or fled," Roger says.

"*Avada kedavra!*" Bellatrix cries. An inferius explodes.

Now she's taking them seriously. Harry smiles grimly. But his allies can't reach Bellatrix through the inferi either – not using traditional duelling techniques.

"*Avis oppugno!*" A dozen eagles stream from Hermione's wand, rising high above the carnage, but only to gain speed to swoop down on Bellatrix, talons extended. A wave and the eagles are transfigured into harmless feathers, but Bellatrix can't block Fleur's lightning at the same time.

Riddle doesn't even glance over. He raises his wand and a fiery stag lunges for his arm as Harry reflexively ducks behind inferi, but as soon as he is out of sight Harry's breath stutters. He can't risk Riddle turning to more readily available targets. He steps back into the corridor.

A rope of fire links Riddle's wand to the stag, warm and coaxing. *Come to my side*, it purrs.

Harry's fire – because it is still *his* fire – roars. Riddle's eyes widen before he leaps out the way of charging antlers.

"Careful what you wish for," Harry says.

"You've a firm grip," Riddle grins, teeth gleam in the light, framed in sweat starting to bead on his temples. "But maybe I like it."

Harry will blame his flush on a close call with Amelia's fireball. She's holding up alright. The duel is a deadlock, for now. His allies can't get ahead, and Bellatrix is carving through the inferi like butter. It's only a matter of time before there are no more bodies to block killing curses.

"Can everyone run?" Harry calls. A chorus back tells him they can, if they had anywhere to go. They're still surrounded by Stoeva, Bellatrix and Riddle. "Corral them to one side–"

A loud crack, a flash of movement – Harry throws his free hand overhead, and his levitation spell catches the thick branches Riddle transfigured into stone and dropped appropriately.

"Pay me attention, Harry."

"Always, Riddle. *Depulso*," he banishes the branches at Stoeva, cutting her off. That's one side clear. This time his fire doesn't waver.

“Impressive multitasking.”

“You’re one to talk.” Casually maintaining the shield around Romanov, a clear corridor to Harry, and his own diabolica fire. As Riddle slashes his wand, it changes from rope to a snake and coils around the stag, trying to smother it. But tight as it squeezes, the stag does not diminish. It bucks, kicks, tosses its head viciously. Every hit it lands makes a hiss more like water on a hearth than a serpent.

Looking at them, Harry can’t tell which is going to come out on top, but feeling it is different. Riddle’s magic is a vast, heavy pressure. A fraction of it leans on Harry’s, as if testing its footing, and when Harry doesn’t falter it piles on more weight as the snake gets larger, denser, darker.

“Magnificent.” Riddle’s eyes burn.

“Why so smug?”

“And why shouldn’t I be? Did I not say you could conduct magic powerful enough to consume most wizards? That you would be quite something to behold?” His gaze trails over Harry, over knees, back and shoulders that are threatening to buckle but still stubbornly straight. His smirk slowly widens. “I do so love being right.”

Harry’s response is cut off by an elbow in the back. “Get out of here, Potter, they’re after you!” Roger says, pitched high in panic.

“We’re all getting out of here,” Harry reassures. He’s not going to win a contest of brute strength. The stag rolls, twists into a mongoose, slips through the coils and sinks its teeth into the snake’s neck. And maybe trying to trick the trickster shouldn’t work either, but Riddle is distracted, locked onto Roger like a cat spotting a limping rat. Riddle’s eyes harden.

“*Avada kedavra!*” Bellatrix shrieks. Krum is forced to intercept. The inferi are thinning. They need to run soon. Harry’s best plan depends on inferi blocking curses and hampering Supremacist pursuit.

The last problem is Riddle. Harry can’t see Stoeva and Bellatrix has backed out of range – the fire isn’t striking at them anymore. For lack of other targets, it lashes out at the ring of inferi, and that’s skipping a few critical steps in the plan. Harry needs them now more than ever. He brings his willpower to bear on that side of the circle, but it does *not* want to be corralled, and another line of inferi fall to antlers and claws and teeth.

Then Harry sees Riddle clear the inferi out of his way to Roger.

Riddle has barely enough time to raise a shield before a lioness slams into it in a steady torrent of flames, and it can't break through, but the force of it pushes Riddle back a step. His wand is occupied.

"Now! Run!" Harry sends a blazing trail through the inferi. Krum steps up to Harry's shoulder.

"You'd better be right behind me!" Harry can feel Hermione's glare on him, but she's not stupid and she joins the retreat into the fire where the inferi can't follow.

"Cedric, go!"

With one last growl at Romanov, the bear runs. A fiery werewolf takes his place.

Ash is sucked up by the heat and wind. Behind that smokescreen, Harry can only hope they got away.

"No!" Bellatrix lunges out of the shadows. Stoeva makes to run around the inferi but Krum's explosive curse stops her in her tracks.

Harry and Krum delay as long as they can. Krum fights fast and mean. Fiery stags and lionesses and dogs attack the Supremacists from all sides. The inferi fall quicker and quicker. When Krum is forced to transform to dodge a killing curse, they know their time is up.

The falcon shrieks out a demand that Harry has no intention of ignoring. Krum dives through the fire and stays low to the ground for cover. Harry gives him a second head start, and then the Supremacists a parting gift; he sets the fire free. It writhes, sending deadly whips after anything that moves. Harry dodges at least three of them, almost burns to a crisp, shouts, "*Lumos maxima!*" and transforms in the glare.

Harry rockets upwards. He's out of spell range before Bellatrix stops blinking. Fiery beasts follow him as far as the treetops, but Harry goes twice as far. He hovers there, watching.

Between the trees and the flames, Harry can't see much. It's just chaos. But then that chaos gains a pattern; it starts to spin. That spinning turns into a vortex and it gets smaller and faster, until it's a dense black rope sucked into Riddle's wand.

All is quiet and still. If Harry had keen enough ears, the only thing

they'd pick up is ash settling like snowflakes.

Then Romanov uncurls from his crouch and dispels the three shields he'd layered under Riddle's. Bellatrix and Stoeva close in on a scorch mark in the epicentre of the burnt clearing.

"Are they dead?" Bellatrix asks.

"No." Riddle doesn't even sound out of breath.

…

"Fuck, Cedric. How didn't you notice a horn going through your gut?" Harry keeps his wand trained on the deceptively small hole.

They only made it a few steps past the wards. Roger is staring at the ladder up to their camp, but Harry isn't sure he's seeing it. "Merlin. The Ministry sent an inferi army to kill us."

"Overkill much?" Harry says, with the distant awareness that he's going to be very angry about that later. The dark stain on Cedric's shirt isn't growing for the moment. Everything in sealed inside as long as Harry maintains the spell. It's better than a bandage charm because if there's anything leaking out of his intestines, it'll stop it in its tracks. Which isn't to say a bandage wouldn't have been useful *before Cedric went for a jog*. It does mean he can't cast any other complex healing spells, but Harry isn't working alone, he doesn't need to do everything himself.

"Oh, believe me I *noticed*. It just – *ah!* – didn't seem the most important thing at the time," Cedric says through clenched teeth as Hermione casts the diagnostics.

"General rule," Hermione says, "gut wounds are always important."

Harry doesn't like the colour of that indicator. "Get a blood replenisher."

Roger summons the potion and holds it out with a shaking hand, ignoring his own burns. Harry is eyeing them next. "They're not going to let you win. At any cost."

"They tried. We're all still here." Even Cedric. The indicators show he also has half a dozen broken ribs. Bet those feel none too pleasant, but they haven't fragmented or punctured his lungs despite Cedric getting trod on and transforming injured. Apparently bears are tough.

Hermione ignores the ribs, as she should – Cedric has bigger problems. He does have a perforated intestine, and she needs to clean it up before it develops into sepsis. They don't have the potions to calm down an overenthusiastic immune system.

Harry moves his left hand in that odd pattern he learnt curtesy of Umbridge's blood quill. "*Leniens*." Cedric sags with relief. Harry pours the potion into his mouth in several increments. "You just relax, we've got you."

His eyes clear a little. "I mean, I was trying not to get gored anywhere else."

"Not an experience that bears repeating, you reckon?" Harry waggles his eyebrows and Cedric snorts. More seriously he says, "You did good. That was very brave."

"Mmm. Herbivores are scary, man."

"Done," Hermione says. A last twirl of her wand closes the skin over the wound.

Harry lifts the spell and calls Roger over. "Merlin, was it on fire when it grabbed you?"

"Yeah."

"Hold still."

No one got away without burns, but they *did* get away. Roger has handprints on his arm. Amelia stepped on coals that melted through the sole of her shoe, and she's missing chunks of hair torn out by the handful. Everyone was liberally speckled with embers, and they've got the pinprick burns to prove it. But eventually, the diagnostic spells show nothing too alarming. Harry sits back and takes it all in for the first time.

It is overwhelmingly grey. Hair, clothes, and skin all blend together under a layer of ash and dirt. Darker tracks on temples and under eyes still show where sweat and tears were baked onto their faces, and it's darker still on Harry's knees where he realises he was kneeling in Cedric's blood.

"*Scourgify*," he casts on himself, because Harry doesn't just want to vanish the ash – he wants to scrub off the first layer of skin that *touched* it. But it doesn't fix the grit stuck to the back of his throat. He

casts it again at his mouth, and Harry's parents never pulled that one on him, but the soap is just as bad as Ron described. The taste is a relief. He can no longer ignore that his mouth was dry with what used to be human flesh.

Harry never wants to eat from the lake again, even though the fish are probably safe, and even if the only other source of food is the Supremacist sponsors. Raiding the Supremacists is certainly more dangerous. Harry takes a deep breath, shakes himself and cleans Cedric next. He almost takes off Cedric's eyebrows as well when an owl screeches nearby.

Fleur looks up. "Do you think–?"

"Quick, before it draws attention!" Hermione says.

Krum rushes to the entrance. He is the only one who has received sponsor gifts before. Harry dearly hopes it is something more immediately relevant than his breakfast, like medical supplies.

Krum returns with a barn owl on his arm, but it snaps its beak when he reaches for the package tied to its leg and soars towards the prone Cedric. Harry eyes it eagerly. Cedric is a pureblood with connections, he could get some high-quality stuff.

But the owl lands on Harry's knee and imperiously offers its leg.

"*You?* Huh. Never thought I'd see the day," Roger says.

"That makes two of us."

Roger leans in impatiently as Harry fumbles with the knot. "Anything Professor Snape made would be leagues better than store bought, let alone what we've managed to scrounge together."

"Ah ha!" But it isn't a potion vial or burn cream salve. It's a pungent root, light beige in colour. Harry stares. His mind spins back to the interminable days in the Room of Requirement with only Snape for company.

I'd rather you send me messages than fancy equipment, Harry had said. *A list of Supremacist activity would be better than an invisibility cloak.*

The gamemakers do not allow messages, Snape had replied.

Oh, come on, like you couldn't find a way around them.

“That’s ginger root. But why on earth…” Roger sounds baffled. It is fair to assume, from his understanding of Harry’s potions prowess, that Harry doesn’t know what he’s looking at. That isn’t why Harry is staring, but it’s a good excuse.

“What’s it used for?” Harry asks, though he already knows.

Indeed. Ginger root. Dice finely. Add and stir counter-clockwise until lime green.

What?

Consider my low expectations further underwhelmed. Most students manage to emerge from their OWLs with at least one recipe chiselled into memory – if not due to studying it, then from using it as a tool to study.

“It’s the base of the wit-sharpening potion,” Roger says.

“Snape,” Harry says, “is a *bastard*. Wit-sharpening potion. Come on, we had a good plan. And ginger! Not even aloe vera – of course not, that’d at least be a mildly useful dig at us.”

Roger winces in sympathy. “I might be able to use it. And if we get desperate, we can eat it.”

It has served its purpose. “Be my guest,” Harry drawls to disguise how fast his heart is pounding.

Ginger is the first ingredient in the wit-sharpening potion, Potter. Maybe you’ll come to your wits and run, but I won’t hold my breath. Ginger root means you need to pay attention.

Pay attention to what?

Everything. Death can come from anywhere if someone in your camp is under the imperius.

Chapter End Notes

> So… see you in a few weeks, I guess? If none of you catch me with pitchforks in the meantime.
>
> Head back to chapter 22 for a refresher on the diabolica fire lesson that Tom referred to several times.
>
> Side note: Tom absolutely pulled strings to get the head boy position on his resume. He went over Dumbledore to the board of

governors. Dumbledore was all for Cedric. Whether Tom was rightfully overcoming Dumbledore's prejudice or cheated Cedric out of the position is up to you.

I spy

Chapter Summary

> Harry has to find the mole before they do irreparable damage, and it takes some careful spying of his own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The imperius is an insidious spell. If the victim doesn't remember their attacker casting the curse, they won't notice they were influenced even after they're freed – they weren't fighting against repugnant orders, their wants were twisted against them. They rationalise their actions, whether that is signing over the deed to their home or killing a politician, it just makes sense at the time. Emerging from the effects feels like surfacing from brief psychosis. It leaves the victim with the guilt and enduring fear of their mind betraying them again at any moment. It is unforgiveable for a reason.

Harry watches, looking for changes in behaviour he knows he won't find. He doesn't know who is cursed. He doesn't know what they've been ordered to do. It could be anything.

Kill them while you're on watch.

Start with the weakest.

Start with the strongest.

Imperius your allies and force them to help.

Poison the food.

Destroy the healing potions.

Sabotage the wards.

Show everyone where you're hiding.

Gather your allies close and blow yourself up.

Harry clenches his wand in his pocket. Keeping it out of sight is the most he can do not to let on that something is catastrophically wrong. He can't bring himself to holster it.

His friends continue blissfully unaware. They're rattled by the recent fight, but the evening routine settles them. Fleur is locking down the wards (or is she?). Hermione is tending to Cedric. There would be no time to stop her if she turned that bone mending spell into a bone-breaker. Could that be the betrayal Trelawney predicted? The imperius certainly ensures he doesn't trust anyone, but does it count as a betrayal if it's not their choice?

Amelia is heading for the frypan until Harry volunteers to do the cooking. She looks lost, so he asks her to chop the celery. She doesn't throw the knife at him.

"Mazet isn't dead yet. None of them are," Roger calls from the lounge room. He's been checking the list compulsively since they returned.

"Damn," Harry says. If she was wounded, she'll probably pull through. Any damage too grievous for magic to heal would've killed her by now.

"It was a waste of time," Roger says and Harry grunts agreement.

Worse – Harry revealed a few of the cards up his sleeves with nothing to show for it. They won't underestimate him as much a second time.

Harry has a good view from the kitchen. He can watch Krum arrange the sleeping area, until Roger approaches and blocks his view. As usual, he wants a word, and judging by the look on his face, Harry isn't in the mood to hear it.

"We should split up."

Well, Harry was right. He sighs and dumps their last potatoes and celery into the soup. "Tell me how you think a smaller, weaker group would've gotten away from the Supremacists and inferi alive."

"We wouldn't have gotten *into* it if the Ministry weren't so set against us," Roger says. "More specifically – set against *you*."

From the corner of his eye, Harry watches Roger puff up. Harry doesn't rise to it. He won't take his eyes off the soup while Roger is close enough to slip something in – he knows poisons better than anyone.

Roger huffs at his lacklustre response. "It was a good plan," he insists. "The Ministry interfered on purpose. They'll keep doing it until our alliance isn't big enough to worry them."

“They’ll keep doing it until only Bellatrix and her posse are left,” Harry says flatly. He levitates a whole lot of stinging nettles into a different boiling pot. It is one of very few ingredients the warmer side of the arena has in abundance. “Splitting up plays into their hands. It’s the first step for divide and conquer.”

“No, if we split, we divide their attention and some of us might survive,” Roger says. If Harry reads uncharitably between the lines, it sounds like Roger has changed his mind about who’d be in his ideal trio, and he thinks Harry would make a more effective decoy than shield. “There are seven of us. Certainly, seven is a powerful number, but seven into three does not go. We’ll have to split at some point – why not now?”

So much for subtext.

“Now is really not a good time.” Harry jabs is wand at the nettles, only partly wanting to jab Roger instead. “*Glacius*.”

“When is a good time for you?”

“Let me check my calendar–”

“Stop deflecting. You can’t keep avoiding this. It is going to happen. It can either be an amical breakup, or if you can put it off day after day and the pressure will build until we self-destruct. We’ll all be worse off for it.”

“We don’t have a good reason to split.”

“We don’t have a good reason to stick together,” Roger says. “You wanted to work together until we defeat the Supremacists? Well, we can’t, not with the Ministry backing them so strongly. That battle just proved it.”

“No, I want to stick together because we’ll be better equipped to whether whatever they throw at us until we’re the last ones standing.” Harry adds the nettles to the soup and purees the leaves and potatoes with another muttered spell.

“But don’t you see? Inferi armies are not normal, and it must be just the beginning! The Ministry despises you – they’ll throw *everything* at you.”

“Of course they will.” Harry is abruptly fed up. He plants his hands on the table. “The Supremacists, the Ministry – they’re *bullies*. They throw

their weight around because they can, it's what they *do*. Splitting up will not satisfy them, it will just make us weaker, and weakness to a bully is like blood in the water."

"Provoking them doesn't help!"

"Nothing helps. You can't appease them – that's the trap. You think if you can give them what they want, or if they hurt you enough to be satisfied, then they'll stop. But they'll never be satisfied, because they want to feel powerful, and the more they take from you, the smaller they make you, the larger they feel."

"Defying them just makes them hit harder."

"The next hit is coming no matter what. What does it matter how hard they throw us down if we are determined to bounce? We only lose when we stop getting back up."

"Determination doesn't shake off death."

"We're hard to kill."

"Easy for the strongest to say." Roger says. "I can only hope I'm still alive to say I told you so when you finally regret this. What if their next curveball is that the third task isn't over until there is a sole victor? You're practically daring them to do it."

"They don't need ideas, thanks. Dinner's up," he calls. He summons the bowls and spells the soup into them, then levitates them to the table.

Amelia warily sticks her head around the doorway. She looks between them. "Are you done?"

"Yeah, we're done," Harry says.

Roger shakes his head. "You'll have to face reality eventually," he says as Hermione and Krum support a limping Cedric.

Harry doesn't answer. He's not going to force everyone to sit through an argument while they eat. Besides, he's reserving a lot of his concentration for silently casting poison detection spells beneath the table, in case someone pulled one over him.

They chat about the inferi battle – mistakes, missed opportunities, new strategies. Harry peppers in his observations, because in normal

circumstances there is nothing that would distract him from planning, but Hermione is shooting him side-eyes so there's at least one he's not fooling. She knows his past escapades too well to think that plans gone awry would shock him.

No one is acting differently and there's been no sabotage yet, as far as Harry can tell. He wonders if it's possible the target fought off the effects without noticing, but decides it's not likely. No one managed to consistently resist the imperius in Moody's lesson, no one except Harry, Riddle and – and Fleur.

Harry straightens and pushes away his empty bowl.

"Fleur, I just had an idea. Would you come with me?" Harry asks. The others look over curiously. Harry waves them off. "Wards. Won't take long."

As soon as he ducks out the entrance, out of sight, he drops a wandless muffling spell around them. Harry stares at the canvas like he can see through it. He doesn't want them unsupervised a moment longer than necessary.

Fleur's eyes narrow. "If this is about Roger asking me and Cedric to run off with him…"

"He what? No. Someone is under the imperius. I don't know who."

Suspicion widens into the near edge of panic. "How do you know?"

"I can't tell you that," he says. His gaze flicks to a nearby omniocular. Some people can read lips.

Fleur scrutinises him for a long moment. Harry marshals his arguments, weighs how little he can say, but all she asks is, "Are you sure?"

Harry considers whether Snape could be messing with him. A few weeks ago, he might've thought so, but that was before uncovering Pettigrew and being taught secret spells that Snape invented and *"You are going to survive – I will accept no less"* and – well, just before. Now, Snape is one of very few people he trusts enough to consider counteraction a betrayal. Which is possible. "As sure as I can be."

"What is the plan, then? Must we wait until we catch them in the act, or they throw it off?"

“All of them managed to throw off Moody’s imperius eventually.” He straightens decisively. “We give them time. Keep everyone alive and fix the damage as it comes. Check *everything*, but especially the food, medicine, and wards.”

“We can trade off watches tonight,” Fleur says.

“I’ll go first. With effort. Bet you Cedric will volunteer because he’s been sleeping all afternoon while we’ve been doing chores.”

“No bet,” Fleur says with the same aggravated fondness. She sobers. “We cannot keep up with so little sleep for long. We must lure them out.”

“Yeah.” But Harry is not quite sure how to do that.

“What do we tell the others?”

“Nothing,” he says grimly. “We do *not* want to see what the puppet will do if they’re desperate.”

They’re hardly back inside when Cedric says, “I’ll take first watch.”

Harry pouts at Fleur.

“No bet,” she mouths back.

Shame. He could’ve freed himself from cleaning duty. He turns his unimpressed stare on Cedric. “No, you won’t. You’re going to *rest*.”

“I’m the only one who’s gotten any. Everyone is exhausted from the fight.”

“That potion was little better than a pepper-up. You’re still anaemic. If you stress your system now you could go downhill.”

“We do not need a watch,” Fleur says. “Harry’s idea was a good one. We can all sleep.”

As Fleur expertly fabricates details to assuage Hermione’s curiosity, Harry’s heart kicks up a gear. She has just engineered the perfect opportunity for someone to take advantage of.

His allies settle down one by one. Harry lays in the dark clutching his wand, maintaining seven invisible shields, but no one moves until morning.

…

Morning finds Harry with the odd combination of tired and too keyed up to sit still. He runs the healing potions past every poison detector he knows. He sets trip-line spells around their bags which will make his wand vibrate if anyone disturbs them. He animates the furniture, the fabric door partitions, the multitude of ropes holding the tent together. The spells are dormant but ready to lash out on his word. Or mostly dormant. The living room rug twitches when Krum passes too close with his dirty shoes, but no one has noticed. Harry wouldn't call it soothing; getting away with so much covet magic under their noses made him all too aware how quickly someone could sabotage them, even if it did also take a distraction from Fleur. And Roger has been inadvertently helpful, pulling alliance members off for private chats when he thinks Harry isn't paying attention. It's done wonders for Harry's productivity – much less for group cohesion.

Harry draws the line when Amelia leaves the tent in tears. He spares Roger a glare before following her.

Cedric beat him to it. He rubs her back as she cries into his shirt. "Hey, shh."

"But he's right! I'm the odd one out. I'm the worst fighter, and you're all old friends. It was just me and Lizzy, but now she's – she's…"

Harry squeezes her shoulder. She cries harder. He and Roger are going to have *words*. "What did he say?" Harry murmurs to Cedric.

Cedric winces. "That we're two teams of three and a liability."

"Oh. *Oh*. No, Amelia, he didn't mean you. Roger was talking about me."

"What?"

"No one thinks you're a liability."

Amelia looks unsure.

"You know Roger wants me to leave."

"You're not, are you?" Her hand snaps out to cling to his sleeve.

"No. We're a team. You've got your place on it and I've got mine. You always have a place with me." Harry draws her into a hug. "Now, are

you alright to go back inside?"

"Yeah."

Cedric stops him following her with a hand on his arm. "Are *you* alright? You never wound down after the inferi." His gaze skims Harry head to toe. "You're anxious. I hope you're not worried about my close call – I promise I'm fine."

It feels like Cedric is offering him an excuse if he wants it. Hufflepuffs are polite like that. Harry hasn't hovered enough for Cedric to believe it, but there's a tension in Cedric's bearing that suggests he's picked up that something is wrong.

"It's just the jitters," Harry says. Never mind that the battle rush has long since faded. "I just need to work out the energy. I'll do the cooking again and sort our supplies and I'll be fine."

"If you're sure," Cedric doesn't push. "I'll listen if you need to talk."

"I know." Harry heaves a sigh. "Come on, I've got the wring an apology out of Roger and I'm all out of patience, I might need you to put a diplomatic spin on it."

Roger is scrutinising the large map, tracing a path with his finger. He jumps when Harry suddenly appears.

"Amelia overheard you speaking. It upset her," Harry starts without preamble. "I don't care if you weren't talking about her, the words came out of your mouth, apologise to her."

Maybe it's a good thing Harry brought Cedric along.

Well, Harry might as well make use of him.

"Your criticism is welcome – it's helped us avoid some tight spots – but relentlessly venting your stress on other people is not. Either complain to a sympathetic ear behind a muffling charm like a civilised person, or if you can't find a willing listener, scream into a pillow. If you take your mood out on people, I'm going to glue your mouth shut for an hour. If you make Amelia cry again, it'll be a whole day. Clear?"

There's the sound of Cedric's hand hitting something, possibly his face.

Roger is the picture of affront but before he can marshal his arguments, he notices something over Harry shoulder.

He turns to see Simon Boutin's name with a line through it, the ink shiny and wet.

"Oh," Harry says grimly.

There is a moment of silence.

Harry doesn't feel much like arguing anymore.

Roger seems to deflate. "I'll apologise," he says quietly.

…

"Anything?" Fleur murmurs.

"No. You?"

She shakes her head and frowns. "They are not taking the bait."

"They may be waiting for something specific."

"Perhaps for us to go outside. Far easier to excuse accidents with monsters roaming about."

"Right," Harry says. He'd hoped to have it sorted before they needed to leave. He wants every scrap of his attention out there on guard against Supremacists or monsters. But they nearly emptied their food stores in an unsatisfying breakfast. Harry can already hear the others planning an excursion. "Let's go, then."

He and Fleur duck into the lounge room.

"There aren't any new caches on the map," Hermione is saying. "We should concentrate on the lake, where we know there is food."

Fleur meets Harry's eyes and cocks an eyebrow – she's had an idea.

He tilts his head expectantly.

"We *must* see how far the radar extends before we do anything else," Fleur says.

"We can check as we're doing other things," Cedric says. "We're out of meat. We only have enough food for the rest of the day."

“I am *not* going fishing,” Roger says.

“Would you rather hunt an acromantula? I hear it tastes like lobster.”

“I’d rather not eat anything that’s been marinating with inferi.”

“We did before we knew they were there, and we’re fine.” Despite her words, Hermione is a bit green, trying to convince herself as much as them, “Inferi are perfectly preserved – they don’t rot. The lake is no more or less contaminated than before.”

“I can fish,” Amelia says, eager to prove useful. “Sealions are fast. If there are still inferi, I can outswim them, and anything else in the lake.”

“I’ll go as your guard,” Cedric says.

“I could collect some wiggentree bark on the way,” Roger says.

“We should swing by the lake after checking the radar. Wouldn’t want to cross it,” Harry says.

Cedric hums, then shakes his head. “We’d run out of daylight. We can split up.”

Oh, not good.

Harry looks to Fleur to help divert this disaster, but she looks satisfied. This is her plan, he realises, and wants to groan. It’ll certainly be a tempting target, but that’s because its courting *disaster*.

How about we try a regular outing first before upping the stakes?

But Fleur does not read minds.

She raises an eyebrow at Cedric. “Do you know how to scan for the rune stones?”

“Er, would ward tracers work?”

“No.”

Cedric is not deterred. He is unfortunately reasonable. “Well, we know the Supremacists are extending out from their camp, and we know they haven’t made it this far. We can just head further away, towards the boat shed.”

“Alright, then I’m your lookout,” Harry says before Krum can volunteer. The last thing he needs is for half the alliance to run off without either Harry or Fleur. “But I still think we should stick together.”

Fleur, Krum, Hermione. It’s not a good split. If Hermione is under the imperius, Fleur or Krum can handle it, and Harry knows Krum won’t go straight to the kill before Fleur can explain. But if Krum is cursed, it would take Hermione and Fleur working together to best him. If Krum gets the drop on an unaware Hermione first, they’ll be in for it.

Fleur stares levelly at Harry. He shakes his head. There has to be a safer way.

“I vote for splitting up. We’d get more done,” Roger says. “But, ah, on second thought, we don’t need wiggentree bark right away. I should get mandrake leaves first, but they won’t grow near the lake.”

“Then go with Fleur’s radar team,” Harry tells him. The only thing Roger seems more afraid of than being in a large alliance with Harry, is being in a smaller, more vulnerable group with Harry. But it’d be a marginally better team balance, at least.

“Mandrakes don’t grow in cold climates or in the open around the lake. It’ll be in the woods by the quidditch pitch, if it’s anywhere.”

Harry takes a deep breath. “Then we’ll get it tomorrow.”

“How many blood replenishers do we have?” Cedric asks. “My memory is a bit fuzzy, did you use more than one on me?”

“Yeah. There’s two left. And it’ll take three days for the leaves to dry and another to brew.”

“So we need the leaves as soon as possible, but you can’t go alone,” Cedric says, brow crinkled in concern. Roger isn’t an animagus.

“I will go with him,” Krum says.

Harry wishes he could tell Roger how thoroughly he might’ve just screwed himself over. He isn’t likely to pull one over Krum. Worst case, Krum kills Roger and flies to the Supremacists to tell them exactly where to find the scattered teams.

Harry crosses his arms. “Two groups is bad enough – three is downright daft. It leaves Fleur and Hermione heading toward

Supremacist territory with no scout or backup. And the pitch could very well be *in* their territory by now. We shouldn't stretch beyond our means out of impatience. If we miss breakfast and lunch tomorrow, so be it."

"That is not necessary. I am fast. I can do two. I can bring plants back here for Roger to start work, then catch up with Hermione and Fleur," Krum says. Which leaves Roger entirely unsupervised with the run of the camp. Unacceptable. "I will also set the radar off near the pitch to lure the Supremacists away from them."

Roger is nodding.

Harry is running out of publicly mentionable objections. "No. Fleur and Hermione need support."

"Then Roger can go with them," Krum shrugs. "I can collect the leaves and deliver them to him when I catch up. It is no difference to me."

"Alright, that's settled," Cedric says. "Come on Amelia, Harry, let's not waste any more daylight."

Harry feels sick leaving the rest behind, but there's very little stalling he can do when preparation is just a matter of picking an empty bag to store their catch.

"Keep an eye out for an ambush," Harry murmurs to Fleur, and then she's gone.

But he soon finds himself out of delays and out the door.

"I'm going to check the way ahead," Harry tells Cedric and Amelia. "Back in a few."

But he circles around to fly behind them.

Cedric helps Amelia cross a gully; his grip doesn't slip. When Cedric turns his back, wand raised to a rustling tree, Harry thinks maybe Amelia will – but no. Amelia stops to examine a clawed tree and Cedric doesn't take advantage of that either.

Harry does a quick sweep of the area and lands beside them. "There's a sphinx over there. Come this way."

"Ah, that explains the markings," Amelia says.

Harry leads them around where the creature is napping. Cedric could

curse his unguarded back, then get Amelia without much trouble, and blame it on the sphinx. Corpses don't stick around as evidence, and he doesn't know that Fleur would be suspicious. He doesn't know Harry is balanced on the edge of transforming, ready for the first whisper of a raised sleeve.

Harry almost hopes one of them does attack. At least then he'd know it isn't Krum. Krum with Hermione. She likes him. She wouldn't be expecting it, and even if she was, Krum is stronger and faster. He is clever, humble, and worse, he respects her talent – he won't brag or gloat or give her a chance to fight back.

Amelia wades into the lake. She transforms into a sealion when the water reaches knee-high, and then disappears in a blur. Harry flies overhead and stews.

Merlin, he wishes they hadn't separated. He and Hermione watch each other's backs. He should've warned her and just run the risk. He doesn't think it's likely that she's the cursed one. With her intelligence and ruthlessness, if Hermione put her mind to it, they'd all be dead by now. She's the worst-case scenario, and Krum is a close second.

Merlin, Harry hopes it's not Krum. Krum is a good dueller, maybe that means he was unlikely to get hit, but a warning shiver up Harry's spine stops him ruling anyone out. It wasn't a neat duel; they were surrounded by Supremacists, they got scattered and their backs exposed, and the imperius is unblockable. Even elite seeker reflexes can't dodge a spell that hits from behind.

…

A scream. Harry's wand jumps into his hand, and he spins to the trees, barely noticing when the armful of greenery he'd been picking out of the ankle-deep water splashes muck halfway up his trousers.

"That wasn't Amelia," Cedric observes.

It didn't sound entirely animal, either. "Stay here. Watch for her."

Harry steps into the trees. It's cooler out of the sun, but muggy. The world is muffled like a blanket was cast over it. Or a net. He doesn't take another step until his ward-breaking spells ping harmlessly off trees, and then he realises the effect isn't magic – there is no sound. The birds and insects are holding their breath, and with Harry disillusioned and creeping on silenced feet, it isn't him they're afraid of.

He smells the acrid tang of an interrupted spell, spots a chunk taken out of a tree. There was a fight here.

Then Harry spies a Ministry-issue champion shoe, size small. He strengthens his shield, edges further around the tree, and sees bushy hair on the grass.

Time stops. He lunges faster than he has ever moved, skidding to her side. “Hermione!”

No response.

He grabs her arm, knocking her wand – it was just out of reach.

She’s cold. Can’t be dead, can’t be dead –

Really. She *can’t* be dead, the portkey would’ve activated.

He casts a dozen diagnostics near simultaneously, reading off the information as fast as it appears. She shouldn’t have been anywhere near here. How did it go so wrong?

The readings make him sway. It’s the worst thing he could imagine – cascade organ failure. She needs Saint Mungo’s and a potions regiment, but she’s only got Harry.

He starts with a stasis charm, but she’s so far gone, he fears it won’t be enough.

It doesn’t take.

No. Nonono.

He belatedly checks the area for wards interfering with his spells, but he doesn’t find anything.

Was it Krum or the Supremacists? Are they still nearby? Where are Fleur and Roger?

He flows through a string of healing spells, not pausing to think because every second counts, one hand holding her arm like it could stop her vanishing at any moment.

Another diagnostic shows she’s getting worse, not better. No pulse. It doesn’t make sense. Harry can only think of one more spell to try, with the last scrap of hope he’s got.

"*Riddikulus?*"

Crack.

Hermione turns into Tom. A deep cut on his chest is oozing blood faster than it should. It's a sure sign of Snape's sectumsempra spell – a curse he didn't even teach Hermione. It could only have come from Harry. Tom's lips are blue, eyes open and dull.

The dam of purpose keeping Harry moving and fighting collapses, and all his emotions crash over him, all at once.

"A boggart. A *fucking* boggart," Harry sobs, a hysterical gasp of a sound. "Oh, thank Merlin. It's not real."

Harry rocks back off his knees and wraps his arms tight around himself. He can't stop staring, even as the image blurs. He numbly lets the tears fall.

Tom is all wrong. His chest isn't rising. His fingers aren't fidgeting with the grass, they don't even twitch, but he lacks that predatory focus he'd gain in the moments he was perfectly still. It makes him look oddly small.

"You can go back to being a dementor, thanks." He means it. This is so much worse. He can fight dementors. But his loved ones dying in his arms – that could happen so easily, and there's no coming back from it. Of course, his boggart changed. He should've known.

A piece clicks. *You will not recognise your worst fear*. Honestly, fuck divination. And *fuck* boggarts.

The adrenaline catches up with him. His arm shakes so bad, he can barely aim his wand. Not that it'd do much good. He can't think of anything remotely funny. If he casts riddikulus again, he's going to get more dying friends. Maybe even Ron or Sirius, for what little sense that would make. And he's not sure exactly what vanishing spell Remus uses to banish them.

He drops his head onto his knees with a muffled thunk and breathes slowly. Riddle is not here – he's out there, wreaking havoc. Hermione isn't gone. Harry will summon the death list from the bag in just a minute to prove it. Even knowing they're alive, his palms still sweat, his heart is beating faster than his human body can handle. Either the time warp of the spike in blood pressure is making him dizzy.

More deep breaths. They're alive. It may be true today, but not tomorrow. This isn't the kind of fear that only rises when dementors show up. The fear isn't going anywhere, so he might as well get up and try to stop it from happening.

The boggart must sense it's losing him because Tom whimpers. It sounds like him, except it's a sound he'd never make.

"You," Harry tells the boggart, "can fuck right off."

Turns out a standard evanesco fuelled by acute desire to wipe this thing from existence does the trick.

Harry stares at the place the body lay. The afterimage is still on his eyelids when he blinks.

Not real, he reminds himself. *It wasn't real.*

He wants to go far, far away, to see and touch Hermione and Riddle, but he's not sure he can stand.

"Harry, where are you?" Cedric calls, maybe not for the first time.

Harry stays silent. He doesn't have the energy to be on guard, and he needs to in case Cedric is imperiused. He wants someone he can unequivocally trust, but for the first time in his life he has no one. Not a single person.

"Harry?" Cedric is a bit closer.

A glowing blue terrier trips through a bush, rolls, and lands on its back in front of Harry.

Harry blinks.

Ron's patronus lays there a moment, legs and tail wagging, before jumping up and racing around Harry. It doesn't speak, because that'd have Ministry officials at the Burrow faster than a firebolt, but it doesn't need to. Everywhere the patronus brushes against Harry, warmth shoots through him. Harry does have people, and not even Hogwarts' formidable wards can stop them supporting him.

"Harry, where are you?"

The terrier bares its teeth in a silent growl.

"Alright, alright, I'm up," Harry straightens his shoulders. He is still

shaken enough that Cedric stands a solid chance of hurting him if he has a mind to, but he ruffles the dog's phantom fur and decides, *bring it*. His patience for illusions and fear has abruptly run its course. Fleur has a point about baiting an attack; he wants straight answers. "Over here, Cedric."

"Merlin, you look awful."

Harry scrubs his eyes. "Give me a hand?"

Cedric pulls him up and is a steady rock while Harry sorts himself out. His legs are jelly. "What happened?"

Harry shakes his head. "Just a scare."

"Okay," Cedric, bless him, does not ask questions. "Amelia is due back soon. Can you move? We should get away from here before the gamemakers send anything else."

"I can probably fly." Emotions are simpler as a bird. It is changing back that won't be fun.

"If you're sure," Cedric says with concern.

Harry doesn't fly into anything, and he isn't so distracted that he misses the sphinx and a forest troll on the way back.

They return to the treehouse with half a dozen carp, a few crayfish, and some pondweed that may or may not be edible but at least isn't poisonous.

They made good time and didn't have as far to go as the radar team. Naturally they're the first team back.

It leaves Harry pacing the tent, checking the list with every cycle. No new deaths.

He wants to fly out there, just to check. They'll be disillusioned, but it won't take him long to notice spell fire if there's trouble.

No, he can't leave Amelia and Cedric alone, especially not in the base.

He wouldn't be gone long. He can lap the castle in a minute.

Nope. Not happening. He does another lap of the tent. Cedric and Amelia started gutting and filleting the fish while he was distracted. Damn, he'll have to check those later.

The proximity ward chimes. Harry almost falls off the platform, he's so quick to check.

It's them – all of them.

"Oof!" Hermione staggers back a step as Harry tackles her in a hug. "What on–?"

"New boggart," he mutters into her hair. "Let me?"

"Oh, Harry," she squeezes him tightly. His heart finally, *finally* slows down. "Of course. All the time you need."

…

"It might be Roger," Fleur says.

Harry glances at her, then back to the embroidery he has been steadily working on in idle moments, taking in the rest of the room on the way. They're alone. Roger is drying the mandrake leaves next door, and there's a muffling spell up besides.

"What did he do?" Harry threads more acromantula silk on his needle. It's magical and strong enough for the purpose.

"You're getting better," Fleur says. The line of runes on his collar does look less wonky than the ones on his sleeves. It should grant a little luck, that extra tendency for spells aimed at his unprotected head to go wide. "Roger was – how do you say – *shifty*. He collected some plants he didn't want me to see."

"Poisonous?"

"Oui. But could be potions ingredients. When I asked, he had good reasons for all of them, but why sneak away to collect them and hide them in his pockets?"

Harry hums. "Definitely worth keeping an eye on. But it could just be that he's preparing to run and thinks we'd stop him leaving."

There is the ring of a spell hitting a shield and Cedric shouts, "Help!"

Harry is out the door and flying off the platform before the syllable fades. He finds Krum, scowling, wand levelled at Cedric. Cedric, bewildered, disarmed, pinned against the base of the tree.

Harry lands too fast, jarring his knees, and casts a shield between

them.

“Harry,” Cedric breathes with relief. Hermione follows him off the edge a moment later, landing on a cushioning charm. She pales at the scene. “I saw him crouched at the base of the ladder, I only asked what he was doing, he attacked me out of nowhere –”

“You lie!”

Harry holds up a hand and raises his voice. “Everyone, get down here. Don’t use the ladder.”

Hermione is already crouched at the base of it. “Fleur!” she calls in alarm.

Fleur lands gracefully and strides over, throwing Harry’s forgotten jacket at him on the way. “Explosive rune. Activated by light. It’d go off at dawn.” She levels her wand at Krum.

“I don’t think that’s Krum,” Cedric says shakily, “He wouldn’t do such a thing.”

Roger’s eyes widen. “He flew off alone, but he showed up on foot and he walked back with us. Someone could’ve replaced him. With Polyjuice maybe.”

“It is me,” Krum snaps.

“Animagus proof – both of you,” Harry demands.

A bear and falcon quickly appear. It’s the imperius, then. Well, that narrows it down.

“*What?*” Cedric stumbles as he transforms back, just about startled human. “But – no – Krum *wouldn’t.*”

“He betrayed us?” Amelia asks in disbelief, eyes wide with hurt and fear.

“Now, hold on,” Hermione says. “We haven’t heard his side of the story.”

“Of course you’d take his side,” Fleur says.

“What, precisely, is that supposed to mean?”

“Lower your wand, Krum,” Roger says nervously, cutting them off

before Hermione's hair can start sparking.

"No," Krum says flatly. His wand stays on Cedric but his eyes dart around the others.

"It's okay," Hermione says. "Let's just calm things down until we sort this out."

"You don't understand," Krum says. "He's dangerous."

"I'm unarmed."

"You are an animagus. You are never unarmed."

"Well, what about you – you could attack again and just fly off!"

Harry hits them both with animagus reversal spells. "There. No one's changing into anything for a while." He turns to Krum. "We've heard Cedric's version, what's yours?"

"I do not know about the runes," Krum says furiously. "He tried to stun me from behind, I blocked, and then he called you. Check our wands. It is as I said."

Hermione steps forward. "*Priori incantato.*"

The last spells Krum cast was a disarming charm, before that a shield, and several cutting charms.

"Why the cutting spells?" Harry asks.

"Harvesting the mandrakes."

"Convenient alibi," Cedric scowls. "It also almost took my head off!"

Harry summons Cedric's wand and it flies out of the bushes into his hand. Stunner, protego, and earlier the detection charms Harry recalls from the fishing expedition.

"See!" Cedric says, "I cast a shield first, I was just defending myself."

Krum squawks in outrage.

Cedric holds out his hand expectantly. Harry raises an eyebrow around the circle – Fleur, Amelia and Roger nod. Harry returns the wand.

“You’re making a mistake,” Krum says, brows lowered.

Harry pours more power into the shield between them.

“There is no need for that,” Krum says.

“I think there is, actually.”

“Give me my wand back.”

Harry nods at Hermione.

Roger grabs her sleeve before she can move. “Now, wait a minute!”

Krum scowls and steps forward. “Unhand her.”

Roger scrambles away and raises his wand. “Stay back, traitor!”

“Woah, no need for names,” Cedric says. “It’s not his fault. He’s under the imperius.”

It’s enough evidence to push Harry to action. “I think it’s clear what happened here.” Harry steps beside Cedric to square up to Krum. “You’ve got to admit, it doesn’t look good. Clearly premeditated. I mean, Cedric cast a shield before the stunner while your back was turned, all the better to frame you.”

A pause. Then – movement to his left.

“*Nox!*” Harry holds the extinguishing spell while his other hand snaps out a silent body-bind point-blank into Cedric’s side. He reaches up in the same movement to brace his paralysed body, catching him with a grunt – heavier than he looks – and carefully lowering him to the ground. He adds a stunning spell and ropes for good measure.

A quick check on the others shows shock instead of anarchy. Only Fleur is looking at Cedric with dawning understanding. But the movement didn’t startle anyone into hexing Krum. Excellent. Harry belatedly drops the shield he’d spread around Krum.

“I’m sorry for not standing up for you, and for setting him off when you didn’t have a wand to defend yourself. I needed him to let me close before I cornered him.”

Krum scowls.

“How did he know we were looking for an imperius victim?” Fleur

wonders as her bad feeling resolves into clearer suspicions.

Harry shrugs. “He’s perceptive, but that’s an awfully specific guess. I didn’t tell him.”

“Neither did I.”

“Imperius?” The blood drains for Roger’s face.

“On Cedric, as it turns out. Probably during the inferi attack.” Harry explains the story as he rifles through Cedric’s pockets for any other explosives or poisonous gasses in fragile vials. He doesn’t think Cedric originally planned to use the rune for anything other than planted evidence, but who knows what other backups he concocted. “I guess he saw who cursed him, knew we were suspicious, and tried to fob us off onto Krum.”

“You knew?” Krum demands.

“Er, not exactly,” Harry wracks his brains for reasoning that sounds a bit saner than *I was already on high alert and my best mate’s patronus might’ve growled at him which made me more suspicious and then* – “I was looking for answers and his were too convenient. A few things were bothering me, just little things, until, well, I didn’t think you’d volunteer for priori if it’d incriminate you. When it did, I had questions. So I sprung them on him. He answered wrong.”

“How sure are we that we haven’t got the wrong guy? Because we’d better be really *really* sure,” Roger says, wary eyes jumping from one suspect to the next.

“His movement – that swirl was the beginning of a lumos charm,” Hermione says shakily. No one protests this time when she hands Krum his wand. She eyes the ladder. “What is the range on that explosion?”

“Far enough,” is all Fleur says.

“Ah, so I don’t owe Cedric an apology. Looks like I was right.”

“What do you mean? You knew – you countered it!”

“Prepared for the worst.” Moody hammered that lesson home often enough. “I wasn’t entirely sure it was him. Or if he’d snap.” Harry lured Cho or Malfoy with a Wronski feint, but never Cedric. It’s no use – he pulls up too early, but it’s certainly not because Cedric lacks

nerve. He proved as much yesterday, staring down a charging rhino. “He’s good at calling bluffs.”

“So it had to be a surprise,” Krum acknowledges grudgingly. His shoulders drop a little from their defensive position around his ears. “Thank you. For not trusting his word over mine. I suppose.”

Harry tactfully leaves unsaid that he doesn’t trust anyone. If trust was what Cedric was cultivating by passing over the perfect opportunity to attack earlier, he miscalculated.

“How can we be sure he’s the *first* victim?” Roger asks. “The imperious isn’t patient, and it’s been ages since we fought the Supremacists. Maybe one of you is cursed to spread it.”

“This is the first sabotage attempt we’ve found. I expected more earlier, too, but Cedric–”

“He was bedbound,” Hermione murmurs.

“The explains the first night, but today?” Harry tilts his head consideringly. “Cedric noticed I was anxious, that I was checking things. In hindsight, he was trying to work out how much I knew.”

“You think he decided to hold off. Because you knew something was up but not who it was. So instead of running the risk of getting caught, he framed Viktor.”

“Imagine it. One of our best duellers and our expert in dark magic is locked up, the rest of us are preoccupied being jailors, and we’re less vigilant because we think we’ve found the threat. Then he we have a string of bad luck and we’re looking for threats out there, not in here.”

“On that cheery thought,” Hermione says dryly. “I’m going to run priori on his wand a bit longer.”

“Do everyone’s,” Roger says.

“Roger,” Harry says calmly. “Fleur and I are immune. You can stop looking at me like that.”

“But what if –”

“Yes, still a good point,” Harry says. He tilts his head. He didn’t want to question anyone to risk tipping them off. Putting aside how squeamish memory charms make him, they can be thwarted by fairly

basic occlumency. But that ship has well and truly sailed – it has tipped and sunk to the bottom of the ocean. “Let’s ask him.”

“How do you suppose we do that? We don’t have truth serum.”

“We’ll ask nicely,” Hermione says.

“You’re going to interrogate him?” Amelia blurts out.

“Not that way. He’s going to wake up relaxed and confused and the sole attention of the most beautiful girl he’s ever seen,” Hermione says.

Fleur tilts her head consideringly. “He would be boasting – it may not be reliable,” she warns. “He might agree to anything I suggest.”

“You can regulate it, yes? I will place him under a weak confundus and cheering charm, just enough to take the filters off, then it should only take a light suggestion.”

“A few leading questions,” Fleur says. “Okay. Yes, we can try. Everyone, clear off.”

Cedric comes to and his grin quickly turns dopey. “Fleur! I’m so glad to see you.”

“Are you well? You were hurt.”

“I feel great! Did you heal me? You’re so good at healing.”

“Yes, you were hit by a curse. Krum attacked you. He tried to stop you, you were doing something important, weren’t you?”

“Mhmm, but I shouldn’t say, you won’t think well of me.”

“Au contraire, I admire you making the hard decisions, doing what you think is right when others falter.”

Cedric thinks for a ponderous moment. “Harry? Where’s Harry?”

“I don’t know. We ran off together, just you and I.”

“We did? Maybe he’s chasing us. That’s good. Got to – got to lure Harry to them. Just Harry, Bellatrix wants Harry most. She’ll be so grateful she’ll leave us alone.”

“Harry’s life for ours, is that the plan?”

Cedric squints.

Fleur's hair catches the light, and she smiles. "If I'm going with you, I need to know the whole plan."

"Yeah. We've got to weaken the alliance, so they don't go after us as a threat."

"Ah, that was our mistake last time. What else?"

"Hmm, we'd better tell Bellatrix where our camp is and about our wards and patrols, so she doesn't run into us by accident."

"Of course, it's for the best. That's it?"

"That's it."

"Should we fetch the others who are in on it?"

"It's just us. We mustn't tell them, they're not as understanding as you are. You're a true angel."

The angel stuns him.

Harry thinks he prefers it when Hermione and Fleur don't work well together. Fleur never entirely stopped scaring the shit out of him, but he is once again reminded that Hermione set fire to a teacher in her first year. That she and Tom Riddle were like siblings once and he's not sure who was a worse influence on the other.

"Now what?" Roger asks.

"Now we keep him restrained ten different ways until he fights it off," Harry says.

"Not what I meant. How are we going to know when he's fought it off?"

Harry opens his mouth. Closes it. "I… have no idea."

"Do you think you can use imperius to cancel the effects of someone else's imperius?" Amelia wonders. "Tell him to regain his own mind."

Hermione frowns. "What if he can't succeed, do you think he'd hurt himself?"

"Oh. I suppose he might."

Roger isn't listening to them. He's staring at Harry. "He was imperiused to get to you. It's *always* you."

Harry pinches the bridge of his nose.

"Well?" Roger demands.

Hermione sighs. "Roger, we *know*."

He rounds on her. "Black and Riddle are obsessed with him. He's put a target on our backs."

"They're going to come after us anyway. They're trying to kill us all. That's the *point*," she says with steadily thinning patience.

"You think they're putting in the same effort to find Ivankova? No, she's safe as houses hiding by herself while he attracts all the crazy."

Harry crosses his arms. "Then the safest place must be a few feet to the side of me, if Bellatrix and Riddle get so distracted."

"Except that's not true, is it? Because they know you're a soft touch. To hurt you, they target us. If you really cared about us, you'd leave."

"Enough." Harry's quiet word silences them. "Emotional manipulation is beneath you." He has their attention. Good. He's sick of this issue flirting around in the shadows. "I'll go if you all agree it's for the best. I believe you've had ample time to discuss it."

"Either he's got to go, or we've got to go," Roger says.

"You just want us around to protect you while Harry draws the attention away," Krum says, crossing his arms. "I want him to stay."

Amelia nods.

"Oui."

Roger watches the cards fall with dismay. "So you're taking *his* side."

"Obviously," Hermione says.

"Not helpful," Harry says, because someone has to while Cedric is out of commission. "Look, if you want to leave, we're not going to stop you."

"So you're kicking out anyone who disagrees with you, now?"

“No. But you’ve had nothing nice to say about the alliance since we got here. If you’re only hanging around because you’re afraid we’ll kill you as soon as you’re not one of us, rest assured we won’t.”

Roger glares. “Fine then. Fine.”

The leaves rustle as he storms off, disillusioning himself as he goes.

For a moment they silently stand around Cedric’s body, a bit at a loss.

“Do you think he’s coming back?” Amelia asks.

“He should. It’s getting dark,” Harry says. “He’ll return for his supplies, at least.”

“What supplies? He didn’t get a backpack in the first task,” Fleur says.

“He can have mine. What? No, not all the stuff in it. But we don’t need a bottomless bag each to carry our supplies. And he did brew all our potions and gathered a lot of the ingredients. He earnt a share.”

Krum grunts agreement.

“But do you think he’ll stay?” Amelia insists.

“Yeah.” At the series of raised eyebrows, Harry continues, “He’s stayed this long because he couldn’t convince anyone to run with him. He’s more afraid of being alone.”

“Good. He knows too much,” Krum says.

“Who would he tell? At worst the Ministry, but they know everything already.”

“You said it – he’s afraid of being alone. He’ll find another ally at some point.”

Chapter End Notes

> I worked several 60 hr weeks this month, so this chapter is a bit clunkier than usual and there are no doubt spelling mistakes, but at least I got it out. Hopefully the work intensity will go down because the next chapter is missing the first scene - usually I'd have no trouble filling that in before the month is out, but we'll see.

True colours

Chapter Summary

> Someone shows their true colours, then the alliance delves into the spectroscopy of someone else.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

–the gash split his skin and sternum, cut into the heart beneath. He should be dead already, but Harry meets his eyes and they're open, accusing, ***afraid****–*

Harry jolts awake. His vision resolves into the canvass ceiling, rain drumming steadily away. Not a bloody forest floor.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Repeat.

He untangles himself from his sleeping bag with difficulty. It sticks where he has sweat through his clothes. Drying and warming charms don't help his shivers.

He picks his way around his sleeping allies, past Cedric's comfortable prison. Hermione tilts her head at him but Harry waves her off. This time she's not the one he needs to check, and her watch is more important.

He stops in front of the death list. The sky is only a little lighter than the last time he startled awake, but it is enough to read the list without a spell if he squints.

Tom Riddle.

Still alive.

Harry pinches himself. He's not dreaming, it's fine. It's a memory of something that *didn't happen*.

Harry returns and leans into Hermione's side.

It's not fine. It's not just that Hermione is reassuringly within reach and Tom is not, it's that Riddle is going to force the issue.

But he hasn't yet.

Harry buries the inner optimist under another load of doubt, but its voice still reaches him.

Three days and four nights in here. He's had ample opportunity now.

It's not a new thought. Harry expected a massacre at the start of the task, if only for Riddle to save himself the hassle of tracking everyone down. It wasn't a bloodbath because Bellatrix is playing with everyone. Riddle is just playing with Harry – what use has he for the rest? He can't kill purebloods without upsetting his elitist supporters, but there were seven halfbloods and muggleborns whose deaths would've been rewarded.

And since then – nothing. Harry can finally stop, breathe, and think about the fight that got Cedric cursed, now that Cedric is safely snoring behind a ward that only Fleur has a hope of breaking him out of. It only adds more fuel to his doubts.

The inferi battle went better than it had any right to.

Someone should've died, but Riddle only really went after Roger, and only at the end. Instead of killing anyone, he saved Romanov, passing up the perfect opportunity to get rid of him without sponsor backlash. He said Romanov could be useful. For what?

He isn't fighting to kill yet. What is he never does? What if –

Harry cuts the thought off. It's far too dangerous. He can't trust Riddle, and if he could, that's almost worse. His trust is bound to be betrayed by someone, and if it was Tom, if he's close enough to strike, then Harry would be close enough to retaliate –

–through the sternum, one heart open, one heart broken –

Harry shakes his head and squeezes Hermione's hand. Her mouth moves but it's just static in his ears.

It's Riddle in the arena. Riddle, not Tom. Tom was safe during training, despite his power, because he didn't have a reason to hurt Harry. Riddle is not safe. Prefixing a curse with "it's nothing personal" won't make it any less lethal.

Power. That's the thing Riddle wants more than you. What if he'll take magical instead of the political kind? Ollivander linked partnership and power together the same way he linked holly and yew. If he doesn't need to be a sole victor, it could explain why he's holding back.

Except it doesn't. Riddle's behaviour didn't change after Ollivander revealed that brother wands can be tenfold more powerful working together.

No, it changed earlier than that. His behaviour turned on a dime when he scrapped Plan A.

After Harry kept his silence about Riddle's legilimency. After Riddle, baffled, declared Harry trustworthy.

But trust only stretches so far. On dark nights, it seems a rule that the most important people in Harry's life are doomed to leave, and most of them had far less incentive to go than Riddle does. Tom likes him, but compared to the chance to rule the British empire?

Harry sighs and lays his head on Hermione's shoulder. They keep watch in silence until the sun rises behind the heavy clouds.

…

A ping of the proximity ward sends Harry and Hermione shooting to their feet and everyone else scrambling out of their sleeping bags.

"Wha's that?" Cedric mumbles, sitting up.

Harry readies a shield and peaks through the flap. It might just be Roger, but it could be a dragon.

It's neither. A huge deer has stopped to graze under their tree. Its ears flick their way, unconcerned by their presence.

"Not a predator," Harry announces. He doesn't lower his wand though. The deer is clearly magical. "Are its antlers…?"

Amelia rubs her eyes, squints, and her jaw drops. "Gold," she answers. "That's a Ceryneian hind."

Or venison. There must be a catch. "Is it dangerous?"

"Not especially."

"Is it edible?" Krum asks.

Her expression turns pained. "They're endangered. And sacred in Greece."

"I know the proper rights to sacrifice a catch to Artemis," Fleur says.

Her stomach growls. “We can respect their customs.”

“I read that they are nigh impossible to catch,” Hermione says. “Swifter than spells.”

Worth a shot. “Amelia, hold the fort,” Harry says with a meaningful look at Cedric. “Krum and I can fly around to the other side, encircle it.”

Three nods, and they take up positions.

The moment Harry’s boots hit the ground, golden antlers catch the morning light as the deer raises its head. It stomps a foot, nostrils flaring. He levels his wand and in the blink of an eye, it’s gone. Only the rustling underbrush proves it wasn’t an illusion.

Krum shrieks a hunting cry and Harry hurries to join him, but keeping up is much harder than usual. There isn’t time to dance around the raindrops suspended in the air, but barrelling into them is like being pelted by soggy bricks.

If he squints, he can just see a bobbing white tail. It doesn’t get any closer, and Harry is astounded to realise the hind’s reputation for outrunning spells might not be exaggeration.

Just when Harry is going to call it off, the hind slows to a walk and sniffs at the grass.

Harry takes a second to shake out his heavy feathers, flies as close as he can, then transforms. He doesn’t give it warning with his wand. A silent, colourless petrification spell shoots from his fingers – far over the hind’s head as it ducks and leaps away.

But it’s easier to follow this time. It cuts across open ground, really hitting its stride and putting distance between them, but it has crossed into the coldest section of the arena. Whatever its magic, it still leaves hoofprints in the snow.

His mind is whirring with the challenge. Speed isn’t the solution. Neither is running it down because he’ll run out of energy long before it does. They’ll need to be clever, a few area-affect spells, maybe turn the snow to ice.

Wait – snow.

Snow means they’ve entered Supremacist territory. No, they’ve been

lured in to Supremacist territory.

Harry squeals an alarm call and pumps the breaks. He rockets into the thickest nearby canopy and feels a bit thick himself. Merlin, they don't even have disillusionment charms.

Krum alights next to him, head swivelling for the threat. Harry doesn't know where the Supremacists are. He only hopes the Ministry are trying to sic their hunters on him and Krum, not the exposed alliance.

Harry repeats the alarm call, quietly this time. He glances around furtively. They won't trigger the RADAR unless they transform. He doesn't think they were in range the last time the hind stopped, but he's not certain.

Krum straightens. He's gotten the message.

They bolt for home, skimming the tops of the trees. Any higher and Krum would be visible across the arena. The canopy hides them from anything from below and their speed dissuades the flying predators. A distant occamy only calls a threat to stay away, which rouses the interest of several bright pink birds. They rise above the canopy, and something about them sets off mental alarm bells, but they pass in a flash.

Krum slows abruptly, whistling for Harry's attention. He's staring at a spec in the distance that Harry can't make out.

Danger? Harry tilts the alarm call up an octave to make it a question.

Krum clacks his beak, no.

After a minute of them drifting closer, Harry can almost make it out. It's either a wet mop flopping about in the wind or a post owl.

The mop flies to Harry and thrusts out a foot holding only a pair of long, striped spines. Harry stares at them. It must be another message, but he doesn't know what, because porcupine quills aren't one of the signals he prearranged with Snape.

Krum cocks his head, but Harry can only shrug. The first potion that comes to mind is the cure for boils, which was a lesson Snape knows Harry's class would never forget: take the cauldron off the heat first. Porcupine quills are a volatile ingredient and can explosively destabilise the whole mixture. They cannot handle heat or pressure. Exactly what he's supposed to relate that lesson to, however…

Harry can barely get his mind or feet around it. And he's still got miles to fly with the blasted things.

Harry does not slow as much as he should approaching the landing. He misjudges his momentum while carrying his weight in water and quills. The rain-slick planks don't help. He skids across the porch and straight off the other side. But only Krum and the entire viewing audience saw it, so it doesn't count.

Attempt two gets him into the tent. He sighs with relief when a sea of expectant faces are there to greet him. One more than he expected.

"That's a no for venison," Harry says. "It's pondweed for breakfast again."

Hermione doesn't seem surprised. "Too fast?"

"Too dangerous. It was a lure," Harry says. He turns to the boy attempting to blend into the canvass. Now, speaking of things which cannot handle heat or pressure. "Roger. I see nothing ate you overnight," he says mildly.

If the way Roger relaxes is any indication, it was a milder greeting than he received from the rest of the scowling alliance.

"I figured my chances of being eaten were lower out there than in here."

"Then I take it this is just a short visit?" Harry spins one of the quills between his fingers. He's getting a better idea just what they could mean.

Roger hums noncommittally. "I had to pick up my things."

"We've set a backpack aside with your portion," Hermione says. "Don't let us keep you."

"Do not be too hasty," Krum says, eying Roger distrustfully. "We do not know where he will go."

He doesn't know where he'll go, if Harry's not mistaken. He watches Roger squirm for a moment before deciding. "It's about time we met up with Ganz and Penchev to share info. Maybe they could do with a third." He tosses one of the quills to Roger. "Here. It's for you. A parting gift."

Because the way to get a clear answer out of Snape is to boldly guess. Snape has never failed to find a creative way to tell Harry when he's being stupid.

"Let's go. Everyone keep an eye out. The Ministry is sick of waiting for something to happen. Failing to bring us to trouble, no doubt they'll bring trouble to us."

…

"I thought it was a myth!"

"Evidently not!"

"Pin it down!"

"Ready?" Harry shouts. The huge head swings his way, and it charges. Now would be a *great* time to have a bear animagus on their side. Alas. "Now!" Harry transforms at the last second and flies between the minotaur's horns. As the world slows, he has a moment to rue opening his mouth. He's just daring the Ministry at this point. It hasn't been five minutes since Hermione sent her patronus off with a message confirming the meeting place.

He lands as his distraction pays off – Hermione and Fleur have roped the minotaur's arms to trees.

"*Stupefy!*" they cast. The six spells only daze the minotaur. It takes three volleys in quick enough succession to take it down.

It's finally quiet.

The hairs on Harry's neck prickle. He twitches his fingers. *Revelio*. The sixth sense amplifies something hidden downwind. He can't see anything in the sparce autumn undergrowth. Disillusionment? *Homenum revelio.*

Nothing. It's not human.

Revelio. It has stalked closer to Amelia the instant he checked the trees behind them. Her back is turned while she checks that the minotaur is fully out.

Harry takes several large steps to get to her side without taking his eyes off the spot.

"Stand up," he says quietly.

“What?”

“Wand ready. There’s something out there.”

“Where? I don’t see –” she turns her head.

Movement.

An entire lion seems to materialise out of the grass *much* closer than Harry expected. It’s two good leaps away, Amelia won’t get clear in time, “*Glacius!*”

The lion coils into a spring, muscles flex, and it launches– nowhere. Only momentum keeps it skidding on the ice toward them, legs splayed in shock, but it soon deploys claws to regain control.

Krum’s curse and Roger’s *impedimenta* bounce off its strangely metallic fur. Well, that’s unfortunate.

Amelia tugs Harry’s arm. “Get away from the minotaur! He wants the easiest prey!” Which prompts the Ministry to activate the minotaur’s portkey. Wankers.

The lion is *fast*. Hermione’s rope is swiped aside and it’s magical enough to overpower Fleur’s attempt at transfiguring it into a kitten. Krum’s second spell pings uselessly off it. Invulnerable, just like the dragon, but surely it still knows fear. “*Incendio!*”

The lion roars louder than the fire, rattling Harry’s bones. It’s large enough to stare him in the eye – Merlin’s *balls* – and it doesn’t shy away from the conjured flames as any self-respecting animal should. The fire doesn’t even singe its fur, instead, it shines like bronze.

“*Protego diabolica!*” Harry’s lioness bowls the other cat off its feet, giving it something to wrestle with while they plan.

Except Hermione is already a step ahead. Harry hears her cast McGonagall’s illusion spell before a lamb runs bleating past them, deeper into the trees.

It works. The lion locks onto the lamb and scrambles after it. Harry’s lioness hurries its steps, snapping at its rump, but doesn’t pursue. She stays braced for the threat to return, hissing like an oil fire, tail lashing so violently that black flames flick off and fizzle out in the air. She’s a spitting image of his mum’s animagus form.

It's quiet again. This time his detection spells come back clear.

"Must be an ad break," he tells the others.

Hermione's lips reluctantly curl but Roger is not amused.

Laugh or cry, Roger. Who knows what else the Ministry has got queued up. Harry is inclined to let the lioness stick around. After a minute she starts prowling the perimeter. Only the poisonous weeds burn beneath her feet.

There's no growl or warning before Ganz and Penchev appear. Harry hopes that means they've come with good intentions, but hope doesn't mean he'll stow his wand.

"Hello," Harry says when its apparent that no one intends to move. Krum is a rigid statue beside Hermione.

Ganz looks at the melting ice, scorch marks, torn up ground, frayed ropes. She raises an eyebrow. "Busy day?"

"Not too bad," Harry says. Ganz looks like she can't tell if he's joking. He wishes he was. Give him an invulnerable lion over an acromantula swarm any day. "How've you been?" The difference in her gaunt cheeks startled him, but her wand is steady, and her armour is spotless. He wonders if the ordeal is starting to show on his face too. "I heard you took a chunk out of Romanov."

"It grew back." She frowns. "They have generous sponsors. Privileged brats. Endless food and medicine, and that nasty knife."

"Knife? That's new."

"I take it you did not fight Black yesterday. It is goblin silver, carrying some kind of poison or enchantment, balanced for throwing."

"That's good to know, thanks. You've discovered the RADAR?"

"Yes. Do you know the latest border?"

"Here." Harry pulls his map out of his pocket and meets them halfway. He points to the notes in Fleur's loopy handwriting while Penchev looms silently. "This was their progress today, yesterday, the day before. They've expanded the circle about a kilometre."

Ganz's eyes widen. "So far. But they must slow down as the circle gets larger."

“Well, yes, but no.”

“You are not telling it right,” Fleur interrupts. He hands her the map. She points to the narrow gap between the castle and wards on the far side. “Look. Soon the circle will be large enough that they can expand this section without destabilising the rest. They will have a line from one side of the wards to the other. No one will cross from the forest to the lake without their notice.”

“We must thin the pack before there is nowhere left to hide,” Ganz says grimly. Penchev grunts agreement.

“We tried to divide and conquer. Didn’t have much luck,” Harry says.

“So have we. They rarely split. We think they leave one at the fort sometimes, but we have not found a way to get there.”

Harry takes that to mean they’re not bird animagi. “Hmm. Let alone break in before the rest of the Supremacists find you.” It’d be a safe way to whittle them down. He glances at Krum, who shakes his head. Harry grimaces. He’s not a good curse-breaker either. If only there was some way to bring Fleur.

“We don’t fight them outright.” Sane. Riddle alone fended off Ganz and Penchev at the opening of the task. “But they keep evading our traps.”

“What kind of traps? Have you tried potions?” Roger asks. Harry would be very surprised. Neither of them stood out in Slughorn’s classroom. “I could help you there.”

It’s perfect. Ganz and Penchev get a potioneer to make up some of their own shortfalls, Roger gets support, and when he feels safer he’ll be less of a destabilising agent. It should strengthen both teams.

But Ganz frowns. “You are a pureblood. No. We will win without your kind.”

Roger blinks. “I – what?”

Oh. Harry had forgotten. The lioness hisses, drawing eyes. Ganz’s linger on the flames. “But we would not rule out working with some of you. Maybe then we could duel them.”

“Not without the purebloods,” Harry says, and it’s hard not to let the frustration out when discrimination is particularly *stupid*. “We need

everyone together. We barely held against them."

"You've fought them? All of them?" Ganz looks up sharply.

Penchev's eyes narrow. "And you survived."

"With or without Diggory – is he still allied with you?"

"Yes. He was irreplaceable," Harry says. It's almost as if blood status doesn't matter, fancy that. "He's back at camp." And that is unfortunately where he'll have to stay until they figure out if he's broken free of the imperius. Hermione and Fleur retried the combination of spells and allure before leaving, and Cedric isn't gushing about Bellatrix anymore, but does that mean he's free, or that he knows how Fleur got information out of him last time and that he can further his mission if he pretends?

"Irreplaceable? Hardly. They are all the same."

"Hold on! Don't just write me off. I've improvised healing potions out of scraps, I've fought inferi and Supremacists, and kept us stocked with edible plants."

"And I am sure you did not do that singlehandedly, but you'll claim and receive more than your share of the credit," Ganz fires back.

As Roger splutters, Harry says, "Credit where it's due, the potions wouldn't have worked without him."

"You're a fighter, you don't need another. What you need is someone with my skills."

Ganz does not look like she's willing to be convinced, Harry realises, and he wonders where Roger will go now. Her contemptuous look at Roger, Amelia and Krum, finally settles on Harry. "Did you call us here to exchange information, or to offload the kind of people I warned you would be more trouble than they're worth?"

Which is about the point Harry decides he isn't going to hold anyone back if they try to knock her teeth in. And his alliance certainly aren't going to agree to split supplies if Ganz and Penchev are hungry, so he won't even ask how they're doing.

"All business then," Harry says. "We saw a sphinx here. Inferi in the lake, but we probably got rid of them all. Acromantula colony here. Centaur territory that side. There are also boggarts near the

boatshed."

"A pair of yetis have set up in a snowy gully. There's a kelpie in the lake, a naga near the quidditch pitch and a forest troll, but we dealt with it."

"Any sign of the basilisk?"

"Nothing yet. No tracks, skins, anything."

Harry hums. "How many times have you fought Riddle?"

"Three. Does he seem to you…?"

"Like he's holding back. Yeah."

"I don't like it." Her eyes narrow. "You know something."

"I can confirm he's dragging it out. I don't know why."

Ganz does not look impressed. "If that is all, then we will go now."

"Hold on," Roger calls, "hold on! Ganz, wait!"

She doesn't turn back.

"*Fuck!*"

Harry eyes him. Snape still hasn't called Harry a dunderhead.

…

"Roger?" Cedric blinks. "You're back."

"Yeah."

"I take it things didn't go well with Ganz and Penchev."

"No. It didn't."

Cedric stares as Roger marches past. "Is he staying?"

"Merlin no!" he calls from the next room. "Potter lured in a minotaur and Nemean lion in the span of five minutes. If any of you had sense, you'd leave as well."

But for all that, Roger doesn't seem to be in a hurry. Harry didn't expect him to follow them back. He absently pats his pocket. The

porcupine quill feels like it's burning a hole through it. *Direct your eyes to step one, Mr Potter: isolate volatile ingredients.* Cedric is contained. Roger is not. Harry watches him out the corner of his eye. His bag isn't in the tent. He can't be planning to stay long, maybe one more meal before sleeping alone. But will he be back again in the morning?

Hermione isn't happy, stalking after Roger. She already perfectly divided the supplies, and this will cut into their portion.

"Well, some of us *can't* leave, even if we need to," Cedric mutters. He scrubs his hands down his face. "Two exotic monsters. Could've been worse. I had nothing to do but think while you were gone. Wonder how long it'd take me to die if you never came back. If I'd starve or if the Supremacists would finally break my cage just to kill me. I wouldn't be able to do anything."

"That's…" *not fair. I'm sorry.* Just words. "That's fucked. We'll figure something out when Fleur gets back. Maybe she can rig it so it'll collapse if she doesn't renew it every day. I don't know. We'll discuss options and you can make the final call. That much will be in your control."

"Every day? How many days are you planning to keep me here."

"Cedric…"

"I *know*!"

Harry sighs and stands. "I'm cooking up the fish and pheasant tonight. Which do you want?"

After a moment, "Anything but more fish."

"Oi. If we had butter or lemon, you'd love my fish." It's a story they keep telling themselves. Nothing Harry does can make it taste like food while he knows where it came from.

He fries the fish carefully. The slightest hint of char makes his mouth feel like it is full of inferi dust. The fish should be nicer than usual, since he can use the pheasant fat instead of conjured oil, but it just manages to turn him off the smell of the bird too. Harry scrunches his nose.

"Dinner's up!" Roger summons Fleur and Amelia from outside. Harry sets the pans cleaning themselves as he leaves the kitchen to see most of the others at the table already.

The moment Harry sits, each fish turns fluorescent green. An indicator spell, he realises, “Poison!”

It takes Harry a moment longer to connect that to the habitual flick of his fingers. It was his spell.

“Shit,” Roger drops his fork. “Isn’t that the fish Cedric cleaned? I told you to check those!”

“I did.” Several times. Harry briefly sees himself with a hip flask and trench coat as he realises how many of Moody’s habits he’s already taken on board. Distantly, he’s aware that they are going to be decidedly harder to get rid of if he survives.

“Obviously not very well!”

“I checked last night. And while cooking. And right before you carried them to the table. With the same spell.” Roger freezes as Harry leans over the table conversationally. “That was a waste of food.”

Roger whips out his wand.

Krum has his in hand already and Harry doesn’t need one. Two disarming spells combine into something entirely different, flinging Roger across the room. He hits the wall, the canvas bows out, and when he falls, he tumbles through the gap right off the platform.

“That treacherous *worm!*”

“–cowardly, underhanded–”

“Quick, before he gets away–”

Harry belatedly draws his wand to vanish the plates. He’s not taking any chances with contamination. He ducks around Hermione swearing vengeance and heads for the more conventional exit.

“He’s not evil,” Harry interrupts before she can work herself into a set-a-professor-on-fire level.

“He tried to kill us in cold blood.”

“He’s fighting for his life and feels backed into a corner. That’s fear, not malice.” He did what he thought he had to, and he’s smart enough to play to his strengths. Somehow, it’s not half as charming as when Riddle does it.

“What does it matter? He knows where we sleep. He could try again.”

“It matters,” Harry says. “It doesn’t change anything, but it matters.” He leans over the porch for a look. There’s no body at the bottom of the tree, but a fall from that height could hardly hurt a wizard, especially one with a wand. “I’m going after him.”

“You can’t mean to bring him back!”

“No, I’m going to erase his memories,” Harry says grimly. It took Fleur half a day to set these wards. Better one person forget than up and move.

Krum grasps his shoulder. “This is not the imperius. He made a choice. If he is not one of us, he is an enemy. If we catch him, we should kill him.”

Harry closes his eyes. “Right. Well, either way, we need to find him first.” And now he half hopes they won’t be able to. “Fleur, Amelia, check he didn’t do anything else, and Hermione, can you find a scent trail, point us in the right direction? Then Krum – I’ll sweep left, you sweep right.”

Krum nods and transforms, rising high to put his sharp eyesight to best use. Whether Roger is invisible or not, if he sets a branch swaying too hard, Krum will notice. And to insure no one notices Krum, Harry fires a disillusionment at him.

Now the only movement Harry can see is the fox circling the tree. It is not surprising the freshest scent starts in a flattened shrub below them. Hermione zigzags back and forth, nose to the ground, before rising to sniff the wind. Red fur turns back into brown hair.

“That way,” she points towards Hogwarts, towards the Whomping Willow.

They fly.

Roger isn’t stupid. He must know Harry and Krum would be right behind him and he knows how quickly they can scour an area. He might’ve even heard their calls. More than once, they’ve gotten close enough the find branches still swaying from his passing. It isn’t easy to run when you can’t see your own feet, and he’s moving quickly. Recklessly. But going that direction is truly desperate. He may be panicking, only remembering their hideout under the Willow as a place where nothing bad happened, too frantic to recall that it is now

within the spiderweb expanding from the Supremacist fort. Or maybe Roger thinks the present threat of his former allies is more immediate than the Supremacists, who could be on the other side of the arena, but if that was the case, it won't be for long. Roger crossed the RADAR line a while ago. They need to act fast.

Krum never wavers as they catch up, target-locked onto the movement. A quiet chirrup redirects Harry to the right path, even as the hunting call lights up every fear region in the instinctive part of his bird brain.

"Goodness – what have we here!" Roger and Bellatrix seem to materialise out of thin air as her wide nullification cancels the disillusionment spells.

Roger pulls up so abruptly he almost falls over. Harry is the only thing to backpedal faster. He and a suddenly visible Krum dart higher into the canopy.

Roger raises his hands, "Wait! Hear me out!" He is hit by three spells before the words leave his mouth. His wand goes flying into Stoeva's hand and Mazet catches the backpack as Bellatrix conjures ropes that squeeze dangerously tight.

"*Homenum revelio*." Bellatrix tilts her head.

There's no telling what they saw. Harry holds his breath, but several eternal heartbeats later, there are no explosive curses sent to flush the animagi out.

"Well, where are the rest of your little friends?"

Harry contemplates the same question. He can't see Romanov, but Riddle is leaning against a tree. Shit. If Romanov's unknown position is concerning, Riddle's presence is downright alarming. His legilimency will sense the animagi the moment he cares to look.

"Went wandering all on your lonesome, hmm? Or did they send you to bait a trap for us? Well, we'll turn that around on them, won't we now?"

Roger wheezes.

"Speak up!"

"I left them! I came to join you instead!"

Harry freezes. He darts a look to see Krum staring at his prey with unaltering deadly intent. He might've realised Roger's goal as soon as Hermione pointed the way. Not Harry. Time pauses and lurches forward and pauses again as he oscillates between shock and pain.

There is a moment of silence, then Bellatrix folds over laughing. She straightens just as abruptly. "A likely story. *Crucio!*"

Roger's scream is ragged, like it shreds his throat on the way out.

Krum throws a wing out to block Harry. It is an unnecessary warning; Harry pulls up as his brain catches up with his reflexes. Davies isn't his to protect anymore. Not after this betrayal. He's going to die unless he talks his way out of it. It isn't likely. Still under the curse, his muscles spasm, straining against his bonds, and something pops with the force of it. Bellatrix giggles.

"Ugh, boys. So soft." Stoeva snorts. She glances at Riddle for a reaction, but he appears to be barely paying attention, idly spinning his wand.

"We are good at breaking them," Bellatrix says as she lifts the spell.

Stoeva takes a practiced step forward.

"Please," Roger whimpers in a voice so small and strained, Harry struggles to hear it. "Don't kill me. I'll help you!"

"Begging already," Bellatrix tsks but she looks thrilled. She draws a thin silver dagger from her hip. A casual flick of her wrist embeds it in his calf.

Roger screams and grabs for it, but before he can, it sails back to her hand. His fingers clamp uselessly over the gushing wound. "No, please! I – I'd be the advantage you need against Potter's alliance."

They're sharks at the first sight of blood.

A scoff interrupts the girls' building excitement. "You attacked them on your way out," Riddle drawls. "You hoped to, what – impress us? Prove your dedication?"

"Yes, but –"

"Useless as an infiltrator. You are dead weight. An anchor, desperately hoping to cast from another ship rather than go down with your own."

“I can be useful, I swear!” Davies says, rolling stiffly to his knees. “I know their camp, their habits and weaknesses, and I’d be another wand in a fight.”

Harry’s heart stutters, aches. Krum hunches his shoulders, feathers rising furiously. He looks ready to pluck Roger’s eyes out. Or his tongue. He’s right. If Bellatrix doesn’t kill Davies, they have to silence him. Harry’s heart is racing his stomach to escape his throat, but he swallows it down; there are no allies below them. His allies are back at camp, reeling from a betrayal they don’t know the half of, thinking they’re hidden.

Krum surveys the ground for a strategic landing site. Riddle will react first, but he’ll prioritise defending himself. Krum might be able to take out Roger if Harry targets Riddle. Then they pray to Merlin they’ll be able to escape. He’ll need the perfect position. There – Harry spies a thick low branch. He can catch them in crossfire.

“Why should we take you?” Riddle asks. “You’ve shown that you are untrustworthy and you’re stupid enough to attack people stronger than you.”

Harry raises his wings to move into position. Just in case.

Riddle dismissively waves Bellatrix forward, but as his sweeping gesture passes the animagi, there is a twitch of fingers, and Harry’s muscles lock. Wings half out, Harry tries to rotate them or turn his head or fall forward. He can’t move. He sees Krum twitch from the corner of his eye before he, too, is held eerily still.

Shit. Wandless magic, even the transformation, requires movement. Short of accidental magic, they’re trapped. Harry hasn’t had an outburst in years, but he leans into his racing heart now. It only slows the world down.

Roger shrinks back from Bellatrix’s wand. She takes another step just to enjoy him overbalancing. He catches himself on an arm, cries out when it collapses.

“Wait! Please! You want Potter, right? He’s more dangerous than you know. He’s an animagus – a golden snidget!”

Fuck fuck fuck. Harry strains against Riddle’s spell. They have to do something. If Bellatrix lets Davies talk, everything he promised will come pouring out.

“He’s lying,” Riddle drawls.

What.

This time the world skips a beat and Harry is left blinking.

“No, it’s true, I swear!”

Bellatrix snickers. “Don’t bother. Tom can *always* tell.”

“But – but Potter spies on you, that’s how we kept track of your movements.”

Riddle rolls his eyes. “We all know Krum is the bird animagus. If anyone was spying it’d be him.”

“Naughty tricksy liar.”

“*Crucio!*” Stoeva casts.

Roger screams, tears streaking his face.

Riddle sighs. “If you ladies are quite done playing with your food, we’ve wasted more than enough time here.” He strides forward and hoists the trembling boy by his chin to look into his eyes. Tension radiates from every line of Riddle’s body, but Harry can see something behind the impatience that he is projecting loud and clear. He is masking a deeper fury than Harry has ever seen.

For a minute, nobody moves. Then Tom sneers. “The mental fortitude of a flobberworm. Ladies, you’ve torn holes in his memory already.” His eyes bore into Roger’s. “He isn’t going to give us anything useful.”

Tom might as well have told Davies to keep his mouth shut if he knows what’s good for him, but two crucios in, Roger is dazed, noticing little more than pain. “You’re a legilimens,” he realises slowly, with a mixture of hope and fear. Blood trickles from his mouth – he’s bitten his tongue. “Harry knows occlumency. You must see – he must’ve tricked you!”

“Potter has neither sufficient talent nor knowledge to create false memories,” Tom says with a cutting glare. “Besides, I’ve seen him transform firsthand. His animal isn’t anything useful.”

“Really? What is it?” Bellatrix wonders.

Tom waves dismissively. “A stag, just like his father.”

Roger lets out a small, confused whine.

“How original,” Bellatrix sneers. “Good for being prey, nothing more. Maybe I’ll cut off his antlers and mount them in my room before we kill him.”

Roger winces as Tom’s fingers flex on his jaw. He sags in Riddle’s grip, only a plaintive moan left in him as his last hope is ground out. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Oh, Davies, you shouldn’t have turned on Potter. I told you your best odds were with him. I thought you were better at arithmancy than this, but I suppose there was a reason you weren’t sorted into Slytherin. You have book smarts, but no ability to recognise an opportunity. Potter would follow someone into hell and drag them out just because they’re on his side. A rare breed of idiot. The rest of us are not like him.” Riddle straightens. Roger drops limp, defeated. “*Stamata kardia*.”

The rich blue of the heart attack curse hits Roger, and then in another flash, his body is gone.

Harry stares at the flattened underbrush and broken twigs. His head rings with static.

Riddle belatedly lowers his wand. “Damn it.”

A serious threat is eliminated. It’s the neatest solution to the problem. Isn’t it? Harry isn’t sure he knows anything anymore.

“Hey!” Bellatrix shouts. “Don’t kill steal! You made me promise I wouldn’t take yours.”

“It shouldn’t have killed him right away,” Riddle tilts his head. “It must be a misnomer. I apologise Bella, I did not think the portkey would trigger so quickly.”

“Oh, come off it, you had no intention of letting me finish him off!”

Riddle clearly weighs and subsequently disregards several arguments.

Harry can’t run. He is trapped, at the mercy of whatever Riddle decides to do next, and Harry clearly cannot predict him. Is this the frying pan or the fire? He can’t even brace for it as his heart tries to hammer its way out of his chest. Wind like phantom hands curl around him, catching him when he stumbles as the paralysis abruptly

lifts.

Riddle shrugs unapologetically. “*He* tried to kill steal from *me*. I thought I’d found a loophole that would allow me the satisfaction of killing him a dozen times over before you got the final honour. Alas, I will have to think up a new punishment for those who try to take what’s mine.”

The wind sooths over Harry’s feathers, too gentle to nudge him one way or another.

Riddle’s tone doesn’t rise above mild, but Stoeva blanches. It was the right thing to take the edge off Bellatrix’s anger, however. The wild glint in her eyes sinks back beneath the surface.

“I suppose it’s just as well,” Riddle sighs. “We don’t have time to indulge.”

“He could’ve been bait for the others,” Bellatrix adds sulkily.

“Not the way he left them. They wouldn’t save him,” Riddle says.

“They might’ve come to stop him spilling their secrets.”

“Pragmatism, from that lot?” Riddle allows a note of wicked amusement through, as the wind cards through Harry’s feathers.

Bellatrix misinterprets him perfectly. “Soft fools,” she scoffs. “I still think we could’ve gotten more information. Their base locations and weaknesses – I liked the sound of that.”

Riddle gives her a look with enough disdain to challenge Snape for the world title. “Do you imagine I read his mind for the scintillating conversation? I extracted anything useful, which is why we are now on a tight schedule. They are planning to move tomorrow but may well leave immediately, worried Davies might return for another attempt.” Another lie. His eyes flick to the leaves hiding Harry and Krum. “They will certainly change where they planned to set up next, for the same reason. If you want to catch them before our intel is obsolete…”

Bellatrix blooms with the promise of more bloodshed. She summons Roger’s wand. “I’m keeping this. He was supposed to be my kill and I secured him, so it’s *my* trophy.”

“I disarmed him,” Stoeva says. Fucking vultures. His wand should be

returned to his family.

“He dropped it when I tied him up,” Bellatrix insists, entirely incorrectly.

Tom, despite professing to be on a schedule, doesn’t hurry them along.

…

Krum stares at Harry the entire flight back. Harry races ahead until he can pretend that he doesn’t notice.

“Pack up! The Supremacists are coming. They’re under an hour away by foot!”

The camp is being turned upside down and poured into bottomless bags by the time Krum lands. He jumps into action after one last look.

“Let me out, I can help!” Cedric says wide-eyed, fists clenched helplessly against his prison. “I’m not ensorcelled anymore.”

“Sorry, Cedric. You know we can’t risk it,” Hermione says as she catches vegetables and adds them to the Not Poisonous Perishables bag. “Right, that’s the essentials. The rest can get folded up in the tent.”

“You can’t leave me here!”

Fleur looks offended. “Of course not.”

Soon the only thing left to do is wait for her to dismantle Cedric’s prison.

Harry’s breath catches as Krum steps up beside him, an inscrutable look on his face. “Is Riddle on our side, is he your agent in their camp?” he asks quietly. It’s clear Krum thinks he knows the answer. The accusation in his eyes is, *Why didn’t you tell us?*

“It certainly looks that way. Riddle is double-crossing someone, but us or them?” Harry shrugs helplessly. “I have no idea what he’s doing.”

“He lied for you.”

“Yeah.”

“Does he actually know your form?”

“He certainly knows I can fly.” A stag, after all, would not fit through Riddle’s bedroom window.

After another long look, Krum nods and his shoulders loosen. Lighter, he says, “Black will not be happy with him when she finds out.”

“Oh Merlin no.” Her Ministry backers are probably pissy, too. “It’s unlike him.”

“To lie?”

Harry almost laughs. “To leave so few loopholes when he does.” There is no way to pass it off as a mistake when he claimed to be a witness. “Or risk being caught so easily,” Harry adds. It’s unrealistic to think that Bellatrix won’t see him transform at some point.

Why? Why go so far just to ensure Bellatrix believed him? She might for now, but not for long, and Tom certainly isn’t short sighted. It *will* cost him.

Harry shakes his head – *focus* – and keeps his wand trained on Cedric until he reaches the bottom of the ladder and Krum takes over.

Fleur spends most of their half hour breaking her wards down. They’re cutting it close, but leaving the wards would only give the Supremacists practice for next time.

Harry transforms as the last one falls. Riddle is surely close enough for his wand to point straight at Harry’s. He’s stuck as a bird again until their next camp.

With half of the alliance double loaded with bags and keeping one eye on Cedric, they can’t move quickly. As useful as a snidget has been for scouting, it’ll all be for nothing if the Supremacists catch up with them now. He wishes he were a pack horse instead.

But then he remembers he’s in a tournament for witches and wizards, and that Hermione is clever, and she transfigures a log into a wagon. They load the bags and enchant it to follow as they run. Krum stays on Cedric’s heels, while Fleur and Amelia wipe the traces behind them.

Harry hovers above, both eyes peeled for unusual movement or hordes of undead or the shimmer of disillusioned Supremacists –

Although, his mind whispers, *it doesn’t sound like Riddle plans on finding you.*

Harry tells it to shut up. He can't risk hope. He has to prepare for the worst.

But there are no more frantic tasks to distract him, and flying always helped him think.

The thought planted a seed, a weed that just won't die.

It grows roots as Harry notices that the lie about the alliance's plans to move was more Tom's style. In a few words he laid groundwork to shift the blame off him and defuse Bellatrix's temper when the Supremacists find an empty tree and a trail gone cold. He is counting on them escaping.

The seedling spouts spikey leaves when Harry remembers the heart attack curse. The only spell which Riddle could pass off as a mistake rather than sabotage, while immediately removing Davies before he could tell Bellatrix anything truly damaging. In doing so, he broke his own rule against killing purebloods who can make his life difficult.

It flowers when Harry remembers that look Riddle shot them, that warning.

When Harry remembers the legilimency, that Riddle knows all the habits and strategies that Roger threatened to share, and that he is free to tell Bellatrix when he knows Harry isn't watching, the flower shrivels, as they always do. But this time it peels back into a tuft of white – a ball of tiny, tethered kites waiting for the slightest breeze.

Harry can tell himself that Riddle wants him to have an advantage over Bellatrix, because Riddle can't kill her himself, so he needs Harry to do it. But there is still a basilisk. There is still Ganz, who is a much better fit for the job really. More skilled, more willing to fight, unlike Harry, who has proven by now that he will run unless his friends a threatened. Which Riddle hasn't done. Even if all he wants is a duel before he kills Harry, he hasn't stooped to using a hostage to force the issue.

A breeze catches the seeds and spreads them – dozens of them – and those seeds hit fertile soil, and then it's too fucking late.

Because it does not make sense. It is yet another niggle to add to the feeling that has only gotten worse in the arena. Harry can't force it down anymore. Riddle is pragmatic to the core. He doesn't do anything without a reason. But Harry can't predict Riddle's behaviour, and that means he must be drawing from mistaken assumptions. But

this is the most damning one yet. Because Riddle – the most ruthlessly pragmatic man Harry knows, a man who will use any means to an end – is acting like Harry's wellbeing matters. It, quite frankly, does not matter to Riddle if he plans for Harry to die.

The thoughts go around and around in his head until he is dizzy. But that could also be due to him impatiently circling their new tree house. He is too distracted to feel the wards snap into place until Fleur calls him in.

Harry restrains his tongue as they stand guard. No one unpacks when they might need to run at any moment. For that reason, Cedric is still free. He hasn't tried anything yet, but then, he also doesn't have his wand. Harry would be a lot more unconcerned if he couldn't turn into a grizzly bear at the drop of a hat.

Hours after sunset, the only life they've seen is a swooping evil. Krum does a last sweep of the area and calls the all-clear.

The dam falls. Harry's words come tumbling out. "I think Riddle might be protecting me."

No one, to their credit, immediately calls him insane. But there are side-eyes going everywhere.

"Why do you think that?" Hermione asks.

Harry shakes his head. "No, I don't want to convince you I'm right – I want you to convince me I'm wrong."

"Alright," Hermione says gamely. "Hypothetically, Tom is trying to keep you safe. Why is he with your enemies?"

"Sabotage," Krum says thoughtfully and Hermione looks mildly appalled. Krum raises his hands. "Devil's advocate. He did kill Davies before he could tell them everything."

"He *what*."

The story bewilders them as much as it did Harry.

"Right then," Hermione says when she's processed it. More or less. She's still a bit wild around the eyes. "If he wants Harry to live, he's not aiming for sole victor, then he is not a true Supremacist. So he went to a lot of effort to join and put up with a group that disdain every drop of his blood, just to point them in the wrong direction

occasionally. Seems a stretch."

"Why hasn't he done more? Caused them to die in accidents?" Fleur agrees.

"And why isn't he here protecting you?" Hermione says. "He has never liked leaving things to chance."

"It's very convoluted, Harry," Cedric says with an apologetic grimace. He seems reluctant to draw attention to himself, but when they don't descend on him with wards, he continues with more vigour. "If he's on our side, why doesn't he just say so? Why the secrecy, the stress, why risk a misunderstanding?"

Krum doesn't have a counterargument for that.

"What would he get out of it?" Amelia pipes up into the silence. "Even if he likes you, he still doesn't *think* like you. He's a Slytherin. They're not driven by principles, like Hufflepuffs or Gryffindors. If he's not sole victor, I don't see what he would get out of it."

"Amelia, that was very astute," Hermione says. "What else are you thinking?"

Harry listens silently. They dredge up every instance where Riddle passed mildly unsettling, and when they can't fault his behaviour, they compile a dozen suspicious motivations to choose from. When they're done with the long, *looong* list of Signs Tom Riddle Might be Evil, Harry says, "Thank you."

"Well?" Hermione raises an eyebrow.

"I agree. He was a bit different when it was just the two of us, and you brought up a few points I hadn't considered, but largely, yeah, I agree." And yet the dandelions are still fucking growing. So that weeding exercise was a failure. He scrubs a hand down his face. "At least I've not got my head completely in the clouds." If several intelligent people with different perspectives and experiences with Riddle can't shake his doubts, then maybe Harry is not fooling himself. Maybe it's not just wishful thinking. His heart races just at the possibility, and not in a good way. "I can rule that out."

Amelia tilts her head. "What else is there?"

"That I'm afraid. It could mean I've been wrangling the evidence into any other possible conclusion but the truth."

“You’re afraid that Riddle wants to hurt you?”

His stomach and clammy hands clench in synchrony. “No, the opposite.”

A little hope hurts worse than none at all.

Cedric leans in. “You still think he might be on your side, after all that? Exactly how different was he alone?”

Somehow completely and not at all. Tom would relax, taking the polite and perfect mask off. “More of a bastard,” Harry decides with a slight smile, “but an honest bastard.”

Cedric doesn’t smile back. He stares, considering his words. Slowly, he starts, “Some relationships are prettiest on the outside. You’ve not said it’s romantic – fine, it can be any kind of relationship, at any stage, but did you feel safe and comfortable when you were together?”

The answer should be no. If not for the myriad reasons they just discussed, then because Riddle has been raring for a fight from the moment Harry met him.

“The first time I turned my back on him, he got me with a stinging jinx and threatened to hold me captive until I agreed to duel him.” Eyebrows go up all over the place. Harry bets he can get them higher. “I called him out on his seduction attempt–”

“Seduction,” Fleur says. “You cannot be serious.”

“No, that checks out,” Hermione heaves a sigh of the martyred.

Harry shrugs. Seduction, provocation – it’s a bit of a blurry line for him. That’s why he needs them to help calibrate, to figure out if he’s getting carried away.

“The second I wanted space, he backed off. He never pushes. More than fear or thrill or anything else, that’s what I feel around him – that respect.”

“He could respect you as an ally or an enemy,” Cedric points out.

“But does he see Harry as an enemy?” Krum wonders. “We all felt the heat from his diabolica fire in training, except Harry.”

“It was warm,” he remembers. Warm like he hasn’t been since laying in the Weasley’s orchid under the August sun with his broom off the

one side and family off to the other, until he found himself tucked into a Gryffindor four-poster with a Slytherin. The warmth had none of the bite of fire, no suggestion that you'll get burned if you get too close.

"That's hardly foolproof. Harry's fire didn't bother Bellatrix in that lesson and still nearly took her eyebrows the other day," Hermione says. "Besides, Tom did it to make a point."

"What point?" Krum asks. "That he can manipulate the spell as well as he manipulates people, or that he does not see Harry as an enemy?"

Harry stares at Krum.

"Now we're going in circles. Why make a point that way instead of just *talking*?"

"Because I wouldn't believe him," Harry says through numb lips.

What if Riddle *has* been telling him, in many different ways; in ways that mean more than words from a practiced liar. What if that is why his behaviour doesn't match Harry's expectations.

Abruptly, Harry realises that Riddle has never called himself Harry's enemy. He has only ever said that Harry *sees* him as an enemy. Harry has to stretch his memory right back to week three for the last time Riddle implied he would kill him. Lately it has just been the promise to track Harry down in the arena and duel, which he supposes is not inherently a murder threat. But Riddle hasn't forced the matter either. He could've dragged Harry down from the tree earlier. He could've trapped Harry near the centaurs if he wanted to fight without their respective allies complicating things.

After a long moment, Krum says, "He did not try to kill us in the inferi battle."

"Or at the start of the task," Fleur says.

"He could be biding his time," Hermione insists, but grudgingly allows, "He didn't hand us over to Umbridge."

Amelia raises her eyebrows. "He helped with the pranks?"

"He rather led the charge," Hermione says, wry.

"Wow, okay. But you two got the blame. That's not very nice."

"Well, no, but he did interrupt Umbridge before she could flog me,"

Hermione says. Her frown deepens. Harry knows where her mind has just gone; it wasn't the first or last time. "And he helped me sneak away to release the swamp when she was interrogating Harry."

"But he's a Supremacist, he must support the Regime," Cedric says. He frowns. "Right?"

"Certainly, he said… or well, he did… he…" Hermione blinks. "Is he even pro-Ministry? Or anti-Ministry? I swear we've spoken about policy a dozen times but his answers…"

"Could please either side," Harry finishes. "Yeah. He does that a lot." Especially for statements he might have to walk-back in his aspiring political campaign. "For the record, he admires Grindelwald's climb to power and can't wait to see him come crashing back down. He thinks the Ministry focuses on the wrong problems and their attempts to solve them are an exhibition of incompetency."

"So he's not a loyalist or blood-purist. Makes me wonder why the Supremacists even let him hang around." Cedric says it flippantly, but halfway through the idea seems to sink in. "Then he must want to be a sole victor, or he'd have nothing in common with them."

"I don't think that would unite them without the underlying ideology. He doesn't need to put up with them. He could succeed alone," Hermione says.

"I bet it's easier with the Supremacist sponsors though," Amelia says.

"Maybe," Krum says. "I am not sure that is worth the risk of them murdering you in your sleep."

"Much less of a risk if one can read minds," Hermione runs a hand through her hair. "Okay Harry, I'll grant you there is something strange about all this."

"It does not make sense," Fleur agrees while Cedric shifts uneasily.

"We are missing something," Krum says. He glances over.

Harry holds up his hands. "Don't look at me. The only thing I know beyond a shadow of doubt is that Riddle wants to duel me." He doesn't even know to what end.

"You seemed to understand him pretty well," Cedric says.

“But that was in training. Different circumstances. Now he’s completely unpredictable.”

But is that because his behaviour changed with the circumstances or because Harry’s expectations are wrong?

“Different circumstances? Not really. In the arena or out is a small detail, the Games started with the Goblet of Fire,” Hermione says. “And knowing Tom, the way he plans things, for him it started *years* ago.”

“That… that’s true.”

“He’s still the same person, Harry.”

“He’s an actor.”

“And you’re the only one who stands a chance of seeing through it.”

Harry is not so sure.

“I haven’t seen the real, unvarnished Tom Riddle since I was ten,” Hermione stares levelly. “I strongly suspect you have.”

He does, too.

“Try. We need to figure out what he’s up to.”

“Alright. Okay. Let me think.”

Harry starts pacing, but it isn’t enough. His mind is racing in too many different directions, until he transforms and weaves through the tent at breakneck speed, sharpening his focus down to a point.

If Riddle is working with or against the Supremacists, it hinges around his ambition to be a sole victor, and if anything got in the way of that, it’d be Harry. This time, Harry doesn’t dismiss the intrusive optimistic thought out of hand. The others came to the same conclusions on their own, so it might not be entirely wishful thinking, but Harry’s expectations could be the pessimistic equivalent, so, back to first principles.

Riddle has never been coy about his desires. He wants to be Minister. But halfway through training, Riddle accused Harry of ruining Plan A and went to Plan B. Whatever the details, his recent behaviour makes it clear he didn’t give up the ambition. He toppled Umbridge and used the upheaval to stack the Ministry with his loyalists. He is currently,

actively, working to take over after Grindelwald. He plans to be a sole victor so he can succeed in politics the way Grindelwald did – he confirmed it when Harry asked. But, no, that's not exactly what he said – he said it's why he *entered* the Games.

After all, he can't ascend to power the same way if he keeps Harry around. He wants that too. It's not a new thought. When Riddle changed plans, he stopped the outrageous flirting. It toned down into something Harry couldn't detect as fake. He relaxed around him. He fidgeted, he accepted and instigated contact that he tolerates from no one else, and maybe he could fake that intimacy to manipulate him, but he let Harry in his bed when he was asleep and entirely vulnerable. He let Harry into his mind, into secrets that would get him shanked in a dark alley. He has given Harry ample opportunity to destroy him, if he so chose. And that was *after* Harry learnt occlumency. It's easy to trust someone if you can read their mind, but he trusts Harry without it.

But that doesn't mean he changed his plans enough give up on sole victor. That's tantamount to giving up everything he worked for. Certainly, he has changed his plans in small ways. He admitted he toppled Umbridge *early*, didn't he? That cost him. It would've cost him a lot more if Umbridge had tortured Hermione until Harry talked, and that could've been Riddle's reason – but, no, that's wrong, he trusts Harry to keep his secrets. He stepped in before Harry could attack Umbridge and suffer the consequences. He *protected* Harry. And Tom was the first on board to destroy the blood quill after his detention, he set up the swamp to get him out of the interrogation, and he wanted to deal with Pettigrew because the rat's knowledge makes him dangerous to Harry. He threatened the wavering alliance and talked Harry up so he would have support around him. He eased him through two panic attacks and guarded his sleep from nightmares. Harry only knows about the nightmares by chance, because Riddle did it without mentioning it, without even banking that gratitude.

That isn't what self-interest looks like.

That isn't what you do for a relationship with an expiry date.

There have been dozens of times Riddle has referenced a future – a *them* – that Harry dismissed as posturing because it was impossible.

I want to know all of you – Tom basking in his mind, not hunting for anything in particular, just enjoying being together – *I did not have to shape myself to fit you* – agitation, drawing the line at Harry's

recklessness while letting people close enough to stab him in the back – *Don't shut me out. Don't hide from me* – he leaves when asked, doesn't push where he isn't wanted – *I couldn't hate you. Even if you ruined every one of my plans* – Tom implies that he trusts Harry, but doesn't act like he is owed the same – *I want your presence more than I want to know all your secrets this instant. I'll have them all eventually. I want to know everything about you. But I can savour the experience.*

That… doesn't sound like something Riddle is resigned to lose. It sounds like something he is planning to keep, at least for now.

But Harry always thought desire wasn't enough, nor should it be. The idea of asking Tom to give up his dreams so that they can be together makes Harry sick. Riddle can't change his ambitious nature any more than Harry can discard his compassion. He may want to keep Harry alive as long as he can, or at least until he gets his duel, which could explain why he'd pick Harry to kill Bellatrix even if he isn't the best fit for the job. It depends how his desires balance out, which one he is willing to compromise, because victory and a relationship are mutually exclusive.

Unless they're not.

Harry almost flies into a post.

Tom would sooner make the world move out of his way than give up what he wants. When told to choose one, Tom will always put his foot down and demand both. It doesn't need to be easy, it only needs to be possible. What if Riddle has figured out a different way to get just as much power and prestige without being Minister? But then why stack the Ministry with lackies? No, he's still aiming for the top job. What if he stacks the deck enough that survivor stigma won't sink his career? Harry hopes that's it, because another way to get around the survivor issue would be to fake Harry's death and lock him in a basement for the rest of his life.

That's what it comes down to: if Riddle wants him for now or forever.

Harry lands abruptly and almost trips when transforming. His head feels full of liquid that kept spinning in circles. The question looks clearer with each pass, but he doesn't know if he's just homing in on a mirage.

"I don't have an answer, but I know how to get it." Harry clenches his hands to stop them shaking. "Give him what he wants and see what he does afterwards."

Amelia's eyes widen. "You mean…"

"I'll duel him. One on one. No holds barred."

"But Harry, if that's all he wants, he could *kill* you," Hermione says.

"Yeah." He would be walking into a situation where one of them will die, more likely Harry, but there is still a chance of–

–his handiwork carved in red into Tom's chest, sharp edges honed by weeks of training to finally make him a perfect Ministry tool–

Harry has never been more afraid of anything in his life.

"It's a huge risk. We don't need to know *that* badly," Hermione says.

"We can make allowances for Riddle being unpredictable," Krum agrees.

No one would ask it of him. It's the perfect out.

If he does this, he'll *know*. His mind wants to skitter away from it. While it's uncertain, there's still a *chance* it could end well.

Harry takes a shaky breath. "Did you tackle that trouble that came your way, with a resolute heart and cheerful? Or hide your face from the light of day, with a craven soul and fearful?"

Ever since Dumbledore quoted those lines – since the first task – Harry has been hiding. And it feels *awful*. It is against his nature. He declared at the start that he wasn't going to let the Games change him, but if he'd spent the last week hunting down the hidden champions to get his friends out of the arena as fast as possible, he'd recognise himself more than he does right now, so afraid of hope that he'll maintain the status quo. And isn't that just where the Ministry excels.

Since when does he hide away from the dark? No more. He's a Gryffindor. It's time to get up and face it head on with trembling knees.

Chapter End Notes

> FUCKING FINALLY! Someone give Harry a gold star, I would if I had the time. Speaking of time, I'll reply to comments soon, for now know that that I read and appreciate all of them. I really don't have time to write this either but it's my stress relief. You could say I'm highly motivated to get the next chapter out.

Extra points for anyone who knows what a Ceryneian hind is and why a certain hero was sent chasing after it rather than any old deer.

Roger back at the inferi: oh Merlin our alliance is doomed
Tom: seems sus
Roger: well, I hoped it wouldn't come to this, but it's me or Harry
Tom: so you have chosen death.
(Since I'll be very late replying to comments, I'll undercut one theory early: Roger is 100% dead)

Tooth and nail

Chapter Summary

> Did someone order 10k of competence for this kinktober? Alright you thirsty fuckers, this is the moment we've all been waiting for: Harry and Tom fully unleashed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The holly wand shifts on Harry's palm. Looks like Riddle did get his note.

This is stupid. This is *so* stupid. Harry takes a steadying breath. "He's close. It's time for you to leave."

Hermione strangles his forearm. Harry wraps that arm around her and tucks his head into her shoulder. Someone else pats his back, another grips his bicep. A long squeeze, and Harry releases her, but she doesn't let go.

"Hermione, please. We agreed."

"What if he brings a second? Or their whole alliance?"

That would be a pretty emphatic answer to his question. "I'll fly away, and Krum will let you know. From a distance. A *significant* distance. Riddle will sense if you're nearby."

"They could trap you. We'll be too far away to help."

"Yeah." Harry won't pretend that is entirely a bad thing. He won't take them down with him if it goes horribly wrong.

"At least set up the field."

"It's a duel, not a trap. We start on even ground."

"He might not abide by your terms."

"He certainly won't if I break them first." If Harry escalates right off the bat, Riddle will match him. He'd probably be thrilled. It might be worth it if Harry could think of a single trap which would catch him, but Fleur's prison wards don't count. Harry shudders to think how

poorly outside help would be received.

He holds Hermione at arm's length, then looks around to meet everyone's eyes one by one. "If it looks like I'm going to lose, don't interfere. Don't step in. No seconds."

"But–"

"I'm serious. You'll be in his way. He will go *through* you." Harry takes a deep breath. "Or you'll save me, and then I won't get a clear answer."

"An answer to what he chooses to do if your life is in his hands does not leave much room for a reply," Fleur says wryly.

Cedric narrows his eyes and Harry braces himself for a bear or worse. Cedric is too perceptive. "Are you more afraid of winning or losing?"

Harry doesn't look away. "Both, for different reasons." His wand twitches again. "Come on. We're on the clock here."

"If he brings out the basilisk," Hermione starts.

They've discussed this already. "He won't," Harry reminds her patiently.

"He hasn't unleashed it *yet*, that doesn't mean he *won't*, it just means he's saving it."

"Not for this. It'd make it a boring fight." And he probably doesn't need it to win, but Harry doesn't say that.

"You don't know what your wand connection will do. Maybe we shouldn't go."

Their wands are one reason they couldn't help him plan the duel as much as she'd like. Fortunately, Harry doesn't mind flying by the seat of his pants so much. "I'll work around it." He pulls her in tight again. "I'll see you for lunch. It's your turn to cook, don't think I'm missing it."

"The eggs were not *that* bad. They were significantly smaller than chicken eggs, thank you, it was an easy miscalculation to make which such a change in the surface area-to-volume ratio."

"Mhmm."

Harry turns and catches Amelia. She's almost taller than Hermione, he realises, when did that happen?

Krum hauls him in next. This time Harry is the one swept off the ground. "If I see no spells for ten minutes, we are coming to rescue you."

Harry's gut twists. Merlin, he wishes he'd won that argument. "Only if it doesn't risk your lives."

Even Fleur hugs him, and she's much less touchy-feely. Then Cedric. He squeezes no less gingerly than the rest. If Cedric manages to not attack anyone today, Krum will give him back his wand when he's outside the tent. It'll still be a while before he's allowed to keep it inside or to sleep without wards unless they can prove the imperius is gone. Harry can't think about it. He must trust them to handle anything the imperius or the Ministry throws their way.

"Go on, he must be close."

Harry centres himself.

Focus.

He imagines with each step away that they're taking his worries with them. The arena falls away. His mind is a smooth wall. Nothing exists but the goal.

Rule one: don't die.

Catch him if you can. Push him if you can't. See how the cards fall when his back is against the wall.

Fight.

Fight him. Fight ***for*** *him, for the future you could still have.*

Harry opens his eyes.

Riddle meets his gaze across the clearing, wand on an outstretched palm. "Good morning, Harry."

"Tom. Good of you to come."

"I could hardly refuse, since you accepted my challenge rather than issue your own." He sounds distinctly amused. "Sneaky."

Harry is unrepentant. “It seemed a shame to waste them all.”

“Very well. But for the record, your scheming was unnecessary. I would have set fair, open terms. Much like yours.” As if Riddle disapproves of unnecessary scheming – that’s practically his hobby.

“Then I take it you accept them?”

“I do have one question.”

“Yeah?” He’s expecting either a threat or flirtation, something like ‘What will you give me when I win?’, not,

“Why now?”

Harry levels him with a challenging stare. Tom covers his tracks, but “I’m figuring you out.”

An eyebrow arches. “Oh?”

Harry considers his words carefully. The world is listening. “Everything we spoke of – that was plan A. It has occurred to me that Plan B isn’t as similar as I thought it was.”

Tom’s smile stretches into something toothy and sharp. His real smile. “*Finally*.”

Before Harry can ponder that, Tom raises his wand in a respectful salute. “I accept your terms. Till death or surrender.”

Harry shifts to the balls of his feet. “I said *forfeit*, death or surrender.” He specifically included a way to call it off if one of them is unwilling, not just unable to continue.

Riddle throws his head back and laughs. “Either of us prematurely give up a fight? Oh, that’ll be the day. But by all means – forfeit if you can, after you get a taste.”

Harry narrows his eyes, but that wasn’t a dismissal. He returns the salute.

They bow.

One, two – Harry breathes, and –*three*– attacks. He casts a blinding lumos charm and ducks under Riddle’s curse as he transforms in the glare. He loops over Riddle’s head, transforms back while still moving at warp speed, and fires a stunner at his back. If the spell doesn’t take

him down, a tackle will.

But Tom is *quick*. He doesn't lose any time wondering where Harry went, he simply covers all bases. A metallic shield springs up around him as he simultaneously sweeps his other hand in a wide banishing charm. It reverses Harry's considerable momentum and he's forced to turn back into a bird to catch himself before he hits a tree.

Riddle spins to face him, following up with *impedimenta* which Harry barely swoops under. His heart races as if it was a rogue bludger. If Riddle immobilises him, it's over. No wandless magic, no transformation, very squishable bird.

Harry lands on his regular human feet again a few metres away from Riddle. It's as close as he dares. Wandless magic is fast, and Riddle is a master.

"That really is an excellent trick," Tom looks delighted. "I do love a creative opponent. Who would've thought a snidget could be so deadly, or a Gryffindor so devious?"

The words register in Harry's mind only as irrelevant. He doesn't have concentration to spare for banter. The surprise attack failed. Harry isn't calculating his chances in precise numbers, but he's aware they just dropped dramatically.

Time to change tactics. The first volley is a test. Harry casts as fast as he can, so fast he hardly knows what he fires off, only that they require a variety of specialised shields and Riddle manages to counter all of them without breaking a sweat.

So, overwhelming speed isn't going to work. Harry can't brute force this fight.

Tom jumps on a slight break in Harry's rhythm and retaliates with a barrage of curses. He doesn't shy away from the dark ones. He pushes Harry's gold shield to its limits and he is forced to dodge when it falls short.

They disengage and circle. Harry waits for an opportunity and keeps waiting. Riddle's footwork is flawless. He seems to glide over the uneven ground. Maybe a distraction would help after all. Harry quirks an eyebrow, "So, was it worth the wait?"

"More than." Tom's eyes are intent. "*This* is what was missing in our last encounters. I was fighting a golem, not the Harry who humbled a

Hungarian horntail. Someone with all your skill but none of your gumption. Someone who put all their effort into protecting instead of fighting."

Harry daringly spreads his arms in the empty clearing. "For lack of anyone else, I suppose you are now the centre of my attention."

Riddle doesn't take the bait. "Yes, at long last."

"And now I can take *risks*," Harry says, because it *is* a risk to transform around Tom. He twirls his wand in a *lumos*, but instead of transforming, he immediately follows it with a silent *imperius* that will shatter the wide shield Riddle used last time. It may even expose his back, if he assumes that Harry is trying to circle behind him again and turns to meet that threat. It would be a perfect target for the stunners on the tip of Harry's tongue. But Tom is either immune to bluffs or unreasonably paranoid – he fires a concussion curse straight into the glare.

The imperius and concussion curses veer off course and collide in a bright ball. The spell trails ignite with gold sparks, linking their wands, but then the curved trails snap taught, and Harry's wand almost jumps out of his grip. Harry yanks back, but the tether resists.

Riddle locks on with eyes as wide as Harry's own. "What is this?"

Harry has no idea. He just tries to hold onto the wand humming in his hand.

The tangled spell ball starts moving Harry's way. His wand rattles harder. Harry doesn't want to know what'll happen if it reaches him. He concentrates on sending it back at Tom. He can feel resistance, but it's working. The ball moves along the line until a sledgehammer strikes Harry's occlumency shields. It falters along with his concentration.

It'd be easier to fight if it promised pain, but Harry is intimately familiar with Tom's mind. He has missed the comforting weight, the clever twists, the unexpected warmth.

"*Protego*," Harry casts with his off hand.

The shield flashes and repels a second legilimency attack.

The ball slows, but it's still coming Harry's way. Gold tendrils branch out and form a cage around them and a beautiful song fills the air.

Harry can't drop the protego for a second. There's no incantation or movement to warn when the next legilimency probe is coming. Riddle keeps Harry's attention divided, adding pressure to create weaknesses, and then pouncing on them.

Harry clamps his other hand on top as his wand jerks in his grip. The ball is going to reach him. At the last moment, Harry switches his focus to reinforce his shield and hopes it will protect him from whatever backlash is coming.

The gold orb touches the tip of Harry's wand, there is a tug in his gut, and then the blinding flash of a lumos spell.

Harry and Riddle recoil, blinking blindly, and Harry feels the link snap. He throws up a second shield in Riddle's general direction – a good move, since a spell bounces off it immediately. Harry circles around to get away from his last known position and when his vision returns, he sees Riddle has done the same.

"That," Tom says heavily, "was not mentioned in any book."

"I wonder if it's all phoenix brother wands, or just us." Harry tests his grip warily. The result – a replay of his last spell? – was fairly harmless, but who knows what else their connection could do. And why only now, what set it off?

They volley again, more cautiously than before. As soon as they both cast offensive spells, the gold link flairs between their wands.

"Do you recognise that song? It's Fawkes," Harry says. He can feel it thrumming along with his heart.

Tom's eyes dart to his wand. "It had occurred to me."

He tries to use the link to tug Harry's wand out his hand. Harry digs in his heels and almost pulls Riddle of his feet. By mutual agreement they disengage, and the gold thread vanishes. Or turns invisible. Maybe it's always there, out of sight, an echo between them.

"Well, this throws an interesting wrench in proceedings," Tom says. He looks thrilled.

"I'm sure we'll manage." Harry blocks a very advanced dark curse with a simple stupefy and grins. Wrenches can be useful. Harry heaves on the tether to pull Tom off balance and casts a wandless disarming charm. Riddle snaps the link and lets himself fall, rolling under the

spell.

Tom bats Harry's follow-up spells aside and as soon as Harry casts an offensive spell, he casts one of his own to forge the link again. While Harry's wand is occupied, he casts a wandless bone-breaker that Harry's protego doesn't stand a chance against. Harry barely dodges in time, the tether slowing him down, and grimaces. Is there anything Riddle can't cast wandlessly? Harry only got as far as fifth year jinxes. But he got *really* good at summoning and banishing things.

Harry clenches his fist and silently summons the sticks behind Tom. A dozen branches soar towards them, ready to clobber him about the head and take out his knees.

The noise draws Riddle's attention, and he knocks the branches off course with a strong gust of wind. He guides the branches around him with a broad wave of his arm, blasts them to splinters and banishes them straight at Harry.

Shit. Harry snaps the gold link and transfigures the splinters into harmless smoke. He dodges Riddle's next spells, rather than risk the link again. That keeps devolving into a competition of wandless prowess and Harry does not want to fight on a front where he has such a disadvantage. Which means curses and charms are out, but maybe –

Harry conjures a stream of fire.

Riddle casts a flame-freezing charm on himself and ignores it.

Oh, Harry can make him regret that. Fire is only very tricky to transfigure, not impossible. Harry changes the flames into thorny vines. Tom's eyes widen but he is already surrounded. Neither the vines tangling his limbs nor the pain slow him down for long – he wrenches an arm free and waves his wand.

"Shit!" Harry didn't consider himself afraid of snakes, but there is a distinct different between suddenly spotting a sleepy adder in a flowerbed and a writhing horde of snappy blighters beelining straight for him. He almost freezes.

The magic is seriously tangled, now. A few more spells and it might be impossible to vanish. That could work in Harry's favour. Harry transfigures the carpet of snakes into a net – it fights him, strands fuse slowly, and some might still have scales, but it's good enough. He banishes it at Riddle.

Riddle slices the net in half and freezes the uneven ground beneath Harry's feet. Harry immediately slips arse over teakettle towards him. He transforms before he hits the deck. But that seems to be what Riddle was counting on. The nets reverse direction, closing in from two sides, as the holes narrow into a fine mesh –too small to fly through– even as the nets grow to span almost the whole clearing.

Harry flies, putting as much distance between him and Tom as he can before he hits the mesh. Then he transforms, landing with a thump on his knees. He tries to vanish it – fails. Tries to cut it – it's reinforced, turning to metal before his eyes, sitting heavy on his shoulders and still shrinking. All throughout, Harry shields Riddle's attacks. Tom vanishes all rocks the third time Harry intercepts a curse. It would only take a killing curse – he's pinned down and can't dodge, and Harry would have to bet his life whether their wand link could stop the unstoppable.

"Forfeit?" Tom asks with a smug grin. Not because he's won, the prick, but because he knows he was right.

"*Never*," snarls the part of Harry that has sunk its teeth into the challenge and is loath to let it go. He is still kicking, and that means he still has a chance of clawing his way back. Nothing, not even clemency, will stop him trying.

"I told you so," Tom says, undeniably fond. "You're a *fighter* Harry. You're in it for the struggle."

He'd better struggle fast. A few more second and he won't be able to move his arms. Being immobilised as a human would be only marginally less hopeless than as a snidget. He spends precious seconds weighing options for the most likely to succeed – he'll only have time to try one. McGonagall's best tricks are out automatically, since occlumency lets wizards see through illusions.

Harry casts a freezing charm on the net. The metal groans as it continues to shrink. Brittle. He only has a small window; he has to time it perfectly or Riddle won't need to kill him. In a split-second break in Riddle's cursing, Harry simultaneously casts a blasting charm and a wandless *protego*. The net shatters, shrapnel flying everywhere, bouncing off his second skin. Harry rolls out of the way of a nasty yellow curse and escapes more or less intact.

Riddle's expression finally cracks with his composure. "How."

"Oh, you know. Spell derivations. Trigonometry. Tautology. It's very

technical, I'm sure." Harry rolls to his feet, blood singing, panting.

Tom's eyes flick down his heaving chest. Harry's mouth goes dry. "You mean topology. And trigonometry has nothing to do with spell modification, which you would know if you'd taken a single Arithmancy lesson."

Harry snaps his fingers. "That's the one."

There's a look in his eye that Harry last saw when he fought the Hungarian horntail. Possibly from the dragon, now that he thinks about it, although Harry's not sure that even she wanted to bite him this much.

"You reshaped it like a disillusionment charm. Without modifying the incantation."

Harry thinks back. "Huh. I suppose so."

"The disillusionment is a different class of charm entirely."

"Well, it is mimicry magic."

"That's not how it–" Riddle huffs like a bull. "I am going to scream."

"Got to keep you on your toes," Harry says. He levitates the metal shards and flings them at Riddle. Surely that is untransfigurable now, even for him. Tom doesn't try – he hunkers down behind a shield and when the pieces stop falling, he pulverises them and raises the sharp dust into a truly nasty tornado and no, Harry is not having that.

Harry blasts a stream of icy air. The tornado teeters between them, balanced between their opposing forces, until Riddle decides he'd rather not lose his fingers to frostbite and lets it collapse.

"You never disappoint me," Riddle says. His pupils are huge black pits. "This is the longest someone has lasted against me in *ages*."

"Let me guess, you ran out of seventh years to beat up before you sat your OWLs."

"I was in third year," Riddle laughs. Then he is abruptly serious, "I never thought I would find an equal."

Warm shivers race up Harry's spine. Riddle isn't toying with him. He isn't pulling punches.

He isn't casting lethal curses.

Harry tilts his head. It isn't over yet, but that can only be a promising sign.

"There is a certain pleasure in overpowering an opponent with a simple charm. Making them realise that their best cannot stand against your warmup." Tom's wand spins in a rapid move Harry has seen only once before. A stunning spell shoots at twice the regular speed, razor thin. It could probably pierce solid *stone*, but a flick of Harry's wrist angles his shield a few degrees and the spell deflects to the left. Harry is untouched, despite the spiderweb of cracks radiating out from the tiny hole in his protego, front and centre.

Tom's grin widens. "That technique won me the Slytherin champion selection rounds. I have not had to resort to more creative methods except to stave off boredom in many years."

"That's sad, Riddle." Harry can't think of any formal duel he's found more engaging than a free-for-all match. If this duel were judged by international standards, Harry would have broken most of the rules already, and he flatters himself that Riddle isn't far behind. In open duelling, if you aren't cheating, you aren't trying. "You've gone so long unsatisfied. I hope your performance won't suffer for the inexperience."

Tom's eyes brighten in wicked delight. "My previous partners described my rhythm and aim as overwhelming. Just try to keep up."

"Oh, it's not your technique I'm worried about. Your stamina on the other hand…"

"There's more to satisfaction than technique and stamina," Riddle purrs. "It takes ingenuity. It's about keeping your partner guessing, engaged, anticipating your next move." Harry swallows. Tom tracks his tongue as it darts across his dry lips. "And then there's the build-up, raising the stakes, the pressure, the suspense." Tom summons a stick into his hand. "*Protean*."

Oh no.

Riddle batters aside Harry's attempts to stop him and he gets off a *gemino*. Copies start pouring out of his hand.

"*Crocutafors,*" Tom casts at the master copy.

And Harry finds himself facing two dozen laughing hyenas. Then another one, and another. They circle, ears and tails alert.

“You are a piece of work.” Harry manages to quash most of the admiration in his voice. The original hyena is sitting loyally by Riddle’s side, spawning more with every idle pat. Harry needs to get to that one, and soon, but first he needs space to breathe. He skips back a bit too late to entirely avoid nipping teeth. “*Reparifarge! Reducto!*” The first wave of hyenas turn back into sticks or disintegrate.

“*Engorgio*,” Tom says lazily.

Even the destroyed copies revert to hyenas and grow to the size of ponies. Their cackling and whooping drops and octave into an eery rumble.

Harry’s breath catches. “Evil,” he sighs with appreciation.

There must be fifty by now, three rows deeps. Harry can’t see Tom over them anymore, but he can practically hear the grin as he says, “*Oppugno*.”

The hyenas charge.

Harry spins in a circle casting, “*Protego diabolica!*”, and lionesses spring out of the ring of flames to meet them. It’s a stopgap at best. He knows Tom can defend himself and the original copy from the fire.

Harry wracks his mind for ideas. Meanwhile the hyenas grow *again*. The lionesses and grim-sized dogs snapping at their ankles look like kittens and puppies in comparison. A hyena almost reaches over the barrier to pluck Harry up before he curls the flames over into an uncomfortably defensive dome.

He’s struck by an idea. He slaps a bubblehead charm on and whispers, “*Nebulus*.”

A thick stream of fog pours out of his wand to fill the clearing. The light fades. Blue flashes of diabolica lashing out at endless hyenas light up the dense cloud like lightning in a storm.

“Aw, don’t tell me you’re running away. *Vent-*”

But before Tom can blow it clear, Harry has focused on the droplets suspended in the air. He has pictured the oily coating inside a chili,

the way it burns his mouth and Merlin forbid he touch his eyes.

He transfigures the fog.

The result is instantaneous uproar. Yelps, howls, snapping, coughing and gagging.

Harry quickly checks his wand on his palm to pinpoint Tom's direction. Through the scattering hyenas trying to fight or flee from the invisible attack, Harry's spots a glimpse of Tom bowed over and heaving behind three different shields. A telltale shimmer shows he has applied is own bubblehead charm and is filtering the spicey air out of it, healing his throat and eyes between coughs.

Harry doesn't have long. He targets the hyenas closest to Riddle. "*Expulso! Expulso!*"

It's like striking a match. He braces for ignition, but they only explode individually.

There's a hyena behind Riddle. Harry needs him, and more importantly his shields, out the way. Harry fires his alarmingly green paint spell. Tom clearly only has some vision back, because he dodges like it's the killing curse. Excellent.

"*Expulso!*"

Harry reflects, as his back slams into the ground from the pressure wave, that he perhaps underestimated the oomph of fifty simultaneous explosions. At least diabolica stopped the splinters and shrapnel – the bite on his calf and gravel-rash up his back are quite bad enough. He thinks some of the chili settled on the ground before he went and split his skin open with it. It *burns*. Of all the traits not to carry across from his animagus form, immunity to capsaicin would've been nice.

Mixed with adrenaline, however, the pain fires him up. He only spares a second to heal the abrasions on his palms and a broken finger to firm up his grip.

What's next? his blood seems to sing. *I'm still standing, bring it on.*

Then instead of waiting for the fight to come to him, Harry takes advantage of the momentum, aiming a *finite* where *homenum revelio* shows Tom's outline in the red-tinged fog. The outline abruptly vanishes as Tom masks his presence. Harry didn't know that was possible. He barely fends off several spells that seem to emerge from

nowhere. The glow of an incoming spell is obvious, but distance and angle are impossible to judge. Time to clear the air. "*Ventus*."

When Harry finally sets eyes on Tom, he at least looks as battered and out of breath as Harry feels. They're on equal footing again, just like when they started. The way this duel is going, the end really might be determined by who collapses from exhaustion first.

"Did you just try to *finite* my bubblehead charm to pepper spray me *twice*? You ruthless little shit." Riddle sounds distinctly impressed.

Well, they're equals in that aspect, too. "Takes one to know one."

"Indeed." Tom waves his wand above his head. Harry has no idea what he's doing, but the way his hair stands on end tells him it isn't going to be pleasant.

The air is charged, like a storm, and Harry takes a guess. He conjures a long metal pole beside Tom.

Tom's eyes widen and he aborts the spell, which dissipates with a crack of thunder.

That gives Harry an idea. He casts a bone-breaker and just like last time, Riddle fires off a curse, taking the opportunity to join their wands with golden light. Tom immediately presses his advantage with a wandless cutting curse and legilimency attack.

If Harry understands this golden stuff correctly, the gold ball makes their wands cast their previous spell, which, in Riddle's case, is a lightning curse that almost blew up in his face. But the ball is heading towards Harry, and as Tom slams against his occlumency shields, it only moves faster.

Harry won't win the tug-of-war if he's dividing his attention with shielding. He drops both his shields and Tom's mind falls into his with open arms.

Harry is at least somewhat braced for the emotional onslaught, but Tom isn't expecting it. *Determination, excitement, fear, desire, desire,* ***desire*** –

Harry's eyes water with the effort it takes to hold them open. He rallies and pushes the glowing ball towards Tom. If he can do it fast enough –

Tom sees his plan and snaps the gold tether just in time, but the backlash still sends him stumbling. Harry follows with a rapid barrage of curses. Riddle is *still* fast enough to withstand it, flickering a platinum shield with ease.

That's twice now you've tried to blow me up. Riddle is impressed.

Harry has to kick him out of his head as fast as possible. Harry casts *protego*, but –

Won't work, Harry. I'm already here.

Harry tries to raise his occlumency shields but every time he gains ground, Tom distracts him. He combines a creative range of nasty spells, a menagerie of transfigurations, and he uses Harry's trick of hurling distracting emotions against him. Harry is buffeted by a wave of admiration and respect. It makes his knees shake, not entirely in a good way. The next wave of lust is flung at him in way that feels distinctly mischievous. Harry mirrors it back, with added spite for flavour.

Well, occlumency was the wrong pawn to sacrifice. Harry doesn't have time to get caught up regretting the mistake, he has to move forward and adapt. Tom thinks twenty steps ahead. Harry does not. Tom can only plan as far as Harry does – that limits his advantage, but it is still an advantage.

Harry is losing ground. Even when he remembers that Tom can't use legilimency and occlumency at the same time, and that without occlumency, he can't see through illusions, Harry can't get the upper hand. Riddle knows when Harry is going to cast an illusion. He knows which one is the real Harry when he duplicates himself, and that any sudden acromantula appearances can be safely ignored. Half the benefit of illusions is the shock value, because no mere spell can split the earth into a rift. Without the uncertainty, it's near useless.

Or is it? Harry recalls a moment on a ladder in the Room of Requirement – Tom is afraid of heights.

Oh, you utter wanker –

Harry waves his wand and the ground drops away. It's suddenly a hundred metres below them, a quidditch pitch laid out in miniature.

Riddle's vertigo hits Harry like a tonne of vengeful bricks. It isn't the same swoop of the stomach that he lives for; this one almost

reacquaints Harry with his breakfast.

A few mental shoves doesn't persuade Tom to release Harry's mind to save himself. Riddle is locked on like a limpet. If Harry keeps it up, Tom is going to vomit or fall over, but he is taking Harry with him.

Really? Harry is exasperated. *For better or worse, in sickness and in health?*

Till death do we part, Tom finishes grimly.

Harry snorts, but ooh that makes it worse. He tastes bile, and Riddle's resolve hasn't wavered. Harry drops the illusion, which puts pay to that branch of magic. Harry must change tacks again. But distractions don't phase Riddle, and no matter how Harry tries to mislead him, he anticipates Harry's next three ploys and turns them into traps instead.

Harry is almost strangled when Tom turns his trip line into a garrotte. Then it is a noose – a snake – a spear. Harry throws it, for lack of anything else to do.

Riddle disintegrates it before it reaches him. "Frustrated and desperate is a good look on you."

Harry turns scarlet.

"Mmn," Riddle hums in appreciation tinged with amusement. "So is that."

Harry must create an attack that can't turn on him, or counter-counter it back onto Tom. It's a race of who can think the fastest. Speed should be an equaliser, but Harry's animagus enhancement only seems to match Riddle's natural intelligence. Harry jumps from intuition to instinct and still can't get the drop on Riddle. It's like he can think in an extra dimension.

Merlin, Harry wants to kiss him. Later. The only thing he wants more is to see this duel through to the end.

Fuck, yes, Tom agrees.

Harry's next spell is interrupted by a clear image behind his eyelids. It's Harry in the gym, shirt clinging, hair wild, wrestling with a trainer twice his size – he is at every disadvantage but still finding a way to fight. It is exactly Riddle's type.

If Riddle is trying to fluster Harry, it's working.

Harry is struck with the barest suggestion of an idea – undressing. He cuts if off before Riddle can pick up on it. Harry needs a distraction. Harry adds Tom into the memory, swapping out the trainer, like a dream he's had more than once. It's Harry, pushing Riddle down onto the mats, kissing him. He imagines Tom stripping, and where that might lead, as loud as he can. And if his mind is telling Tom this is another distraction, well, it *is*.

Harry and Ron learnt the undressing charm in second year on a laugh. But the undressing charm is invisible. Harry casts it, hidden as an extra twirl tacked on the end of a severing charm.

Tom flings away the falling tree before it can flatten him. Then his jacket flips over his head and tangles around his wrists. He yelps and shock ripples through his mind to Harry's. He can't cast. Even wandless magic needs gestures. Riddle is lucky he's wearing a belt, or he'd be tripping over his trousers as well.

Harry rushes forward, firing any spell he can think of. Riddle dodges awkwardly, hands trapped in front of him. Harry charges closer, closer, too close for Tom to dodge.

Tom tosses the jacket, wand and all, in his rush to get free as fast as possible. Holy shit, Harry's disarmed him.

Harry is hit by another wave of realisation, shock, and lust so powerful that even Riddle is surprised by it. It punches the air from Harry's lungs.

"*Accio wand!*" Tom shouts.

Harry is expecting Tom's wand to come flying out of the fabric and he's preparing a banishing charm to intercept it. He's *not* expecting his own wand to be yanked out of his grip, but he should've – of course Tom would choose to arm himself and disarm Harry at the same time.

"*Expelliarmus*!" Harry flings one hand forward, then the other, "*Stupefy*!"

It's point-blank, no time to dodge or shield. Harry's wand goes spinning into the forest the second it touches Riddle's fingers and Riddle is slammed onto his back, but the wandless spell is weak – he is only knocked out for a moment.

Harry can't cast anything stronger than that. He needs his wand back. "*Accio wa*– oof!"

Ropes appear and squeeze the life out of him. Wandless conjuration, Merlin, sure, why not.

"Bit kinky for our first time, don't you think?" Harry wheezes.

Riddle laughs and hauls Harry off his feet, almost into the knee raised to meet his gut. Harry doesn't trust his wandless control enough to try a cutting charm pointed at his own organs, so he transforms. The ropes tighten, predictably, but he's quick enough to escape the coils.

He transforms back and drops his full weight on Tom, crushing him.

"*Ugh*, I'm going to get you for that," Tom gasps, grinning from ear to ear. Then he punches Harry in the kidney, the evil git.

They roll and wrestle and both conveniently forget they can wandlessly cast the knockback jinx. Harry is fitter but Tom is taller; they're more evenly matched in this than anything else.

Harry twists Riddle's arm behind his back, but Riddle breaks free and headbutts Harry right in the chest. Harry gasps. Riddle flips them. Harry can't get his breath back.

Merlin, he's tired.

He's not strong enough to keep up. Riddle is toying with him. Harry is so outclassed. He can't win. His vision darkens around the edges.

Riddle's mind feels like an arctic plunge. Has Harry been fooled by his warmth, too? As if he was smart enough to understand any part of Riddle. He'll have to fight to the death, split his chest open. He's been so stupid, walked straight into a trap and now he's going to pay for it. And not just him – a woman is screaming.

A black mass barrels into Riddle and the weight is thrown off Harry, but it doesn't get easier to breathe.

A face takes Tom's place over Harry, for want of a better word – empty eye sockets and a gaping hole in place of a mouth, and it's leaning in –

"*Accio wand!*" It leaps into Harry's hand and he's already waving, "*Expecto patronum!*"

Prongs materialises antlers first, aimed right at the heart of the dementor. He flips it overhead before he's even fully formed. Harry is close enough to hear it sizzle. He didn't know they could do that.

Prongs emerges fully, pivots on his hooves and soars over Harry. He tramples the fleeing dementor a second time as he charges furiously at the other one hovering over Tom. Harry has never seen a patronus move that fast. The impact punts the wraith deep into the trees.

"Tom!" Harry skids to his side. He is clammy and pale – he looks terrified and *still there* and Harry can breathe again.

Harry's neck prickles and he spins around, wand ready. The dementors are unphased by the threat. It isn't just a pair – Harry counts at least two dozen surrounding them.

Harry calls Prongs over with a sweep of his arm and sends him at the boldest dementor. The swarm scatters but it doesn't stop them approaching from the other side. Harry is always taken aback by how fast they can move.

Harry's instincts scream against being so immobile. They're sitting ducks. He drags Riddle upright, but Tom sways before he even gets his arse off the ground. "Shit." Harry pivots on a knee to bracing him up with his shoulder, pinning him to his chest. He needs a free arm to call Prongs back, hopefully to *stay* – he's not usually so feisty. Riddle's head lolls, and his damp breath on Harry's neck is the surest sign he is alive.

The dementors are eying Tom like a feast. Harry bares his teeth. "*Mine*."

"Yours." It's barely a sound. Harry could've misheard, but he doesn't imagine the fingers twitching against his forearm.

"Hey, you with me?" Harry taps his cheek.

Riddle blinks sluggishly.

Harry pokes him and Tom swats at him. The clawing worry gripping Harry's insides loosens a little more.

Riddle's eyes focus. He latches back onto Harry's mind with something like desperation. Harry catches him with open arms, and the sudden resurgence of *cold-fear-despair* makes Prongs falter. The dementors surge forward and Harry's vision darkens around the edges. The

picture flickers between the ring of dementors and a corpse on the grass – Hermione, Tom – but no, it was a boggart. Riddle flinches and tries to draw away before the patronus falls, but Harry holds on tighter. He isn't going to fail – he refuses. It wasn't real. The weight against his chest, heart beating against his palm – *this* is real. *This* is what matters.

Yours, Harry thinks, and decides to believe it. Given the slightest encouragement, the stubborn hope that no doubts or dementors could put out flares to life. Prongs pulses brightly and lunges. He pivots and lunges at the other flank. He could use some help.

"Rise and shine." Harry pokes Tom again and revels that he can. He wraps Tom in *excitement-daring-challenge*; those feelings within easy reach because the duel is still so fresh his body hasn't even cleared the adrenaline. Tom clings to the feeling, echoes it back. The tide begins to thaw. "You wanted to learn the spell. No time like the present."

Prongs stands guard for a moment longer, but a dementor gets too close and the patronus stomps his hooves and ploughs through the mob, scattering them.

Time to move. The colour is back in Tom's cheeks. Harry pulls him to his feet and they stand back-to-back. The dementors rattle angrily. At least a dozen more are circling overhead, closing in. Harry bares his teeth as a wand flies out of the bushes into Riddle's hand. Harry reaches back to squeeze the other. He feels it shaking, as he feels his doubt. Tom didn't know true fear for his life before this moment – he's never encountered a threat he couldn't overcome. He still hasn't, though he doesn't know it, but that fine because Harry believes for him.

"Remember the memory needs strength, not happiness. You've already gotten back up. That's the hardest part. Ready?" He calls Prongs over to push their aura further from Tom. "*Now*."

"*Expecto patronum!*" A white shield forms around them.

Harry whoops. First try in the presence of surprise dementors, incredible. He shoves the hot and fiery feeling in his chest at Tom, feels it bounce back. Harry is delighted that he made Tom happy, and Tom basks in it, and Harry fights the instinct to cut off the feedback loop. He's feeling so much it's scary, but it's helping. Tom's shield is denser, larger, and starting to twist almost like coils. Prongs is so bright he hurts to look at. The dementors giving the stag wider berth.

A few timid ones on the fringes retreat into the forest.

“Told you so,” Harry sings. “I think you should say it. It’d do you good. Say ‘You were right, Harry.’ ‘You’re a genius, Harry.’”

“Do shut up Harry,” Tom says, but that is the moment his patronus condenses with a flash.

Harry blinks the stars out of his eyes, but the afterimage doesn’t seem to fade. After a moment Harry realises that’s because they’re still surrounded. It’s curled around them, and even above them there is a scaled belly. He looks further up. Blinks again. Laughs hysterically.

The patronus unfurls wings and rears up on its legs and bears long fangs. The dementors recoil but the dragon doesn’t charge. It curls its serpentine tail tighter, twining the tip around Harry’s ankle, a veritable wall around them. The dementors hesitate, and that is their last mistake – the dragon breathes out a blinding stream of phantom fire, and when it hits, the dementors make a noise Harry will never forget.

“Merlin’s fucking balls,” Harry laughs. Nothing is going to get past Tom’s patronus. Tom is safe. Safe and happy and *his* – Tom didn’t make Harry fight to the death. Harry has one of the greatest wizards on the planet at his back, his wand is singing a two-part harmony, he can do anything with this man by his side. And suddenly all the hope Harry feels cannot be contained in his body. “*Expecto patronum,*” he gasps, but his magic roars.

A pulse of warm light rushes in all directions. Tom jolts as it passes through him, but if he makes a sound, it is drowned out by phoenix song. The dementors are swept up by the wavefront, tumbled around like pebbles by the ocean, still reeling when the next pulse hits. Prongs rides the wave and the dragon’s next breath ignites it.

Another pulse, and another, on the beat of their song. The first wave passes through the wards, and there is a nasty electric pop as a brilliant gold lattice radiates out from a black smudge. It is swiftly followed by a dozen more.

The shadow lifts and then it’s all light, all happiness, all fierce love. Harry stumbles around and then he is half pulled, half falls into Tom. Harry feels like he’s been hit with a knee reversal hex. Tom can’t feel his fingers. They’re trembling and panting. They can’t stop smiling. Talk about getting high on endorphins. Harry closes his eyes to the onslaught. It fills his chest with every breath in. Harry hides his face

in Tom's neck, giggling hysterically. Everything else is too much, but Tom is solid. "*Fuck*."

"Calm down," Tom tells him, or maybe tells himself. Harry isn't sure the distinction matters at this point. Harry can't manage a response. Words are just – no.

Tom runs a hand down Harry's back, and that's good, it's nice. 'Nice' is a lot less intense than anything either of them are feeling. They focus on it. Their breathing syncs and starts to slow down. When they've reached a more even keel, they start unweaving their minds. Strand by strand, it's an almost meditative process. They leave their shields down.

The euphoria fades and Harry feels like he's had every negative feeling scoured away, but he doesn't feel empty – thank Merlin, he doubts he could handle the shock. His insides are scraped raw, almost like he's just had a good cry or beat his frustration out at the gym. Harry doesn't know how to describe it, but, "That sure beats chocolate," Harry says.

Tom huffs. "No kidding."

Harry squeezes briefly and lets go. He scans the trees, wand raised, breath misting in the air. Apparently, it's still cold. Huh.

Nothing else has snuck up while they were caught up in their heads. They shouldn't go that deep again. It isn't safe here. The worry registers, makes Harry alert, but it doesn't linger as unproductive anxiety. The stress that's been piling up for months is, well, it's not *gone* because the reasons behind it remain, but it's easier to handle, set on more stable foundations.

Huh.

Tom hasn't moved. He's staring alternatively between the last bubble disappearing into the low clouds and the dragon. The dragon preens as Harry's gaze falls on it.

"Admiring yourself?" As well he might. Of course Tom is in the tiny percentile of people with a magical patronus. As if he needed to make another statement to prove he is as powerful as Dumbledore and Grindelwald and Merlin. Of course it's a fucking dragon. Powerful, sly, prone to hoarding precious trinkets.

Except, admiration doesn't seem quite right. There's an intensity to

Tom's stillness. His mind doesn't feel like pride either. The surface is steadily building into a frothing excitement. It spills over into Tom's eyes. When they jerk to Harry, the pupils are blown wide. Harry freezes.

"You have no idea – *no idea* – what we've just done."

Harry gets the feeling he isn't talking about saving their souls. He hazards a guess, "So you… know what that patronus bubble is?"

"No. I've never heard of such a thing," and for some reason he is delighted. "This is off to a *wonderful* start."

"This? This what?"

"Oh, you'll find out."

"Ominous." Harry leans back. Tom is outwardly composed but Harry would be less concerned if he started skipping in circles – anything to release some of the excitement Harry can feel building in his mind. It's boiling, pressure rising. The only question is if it'll vent or explode.

"But first." Tom dismisses his patronus with a wave of his hand. "I believe we were in the middle of something before we were so rudely interrupted."

Harry's lips twitch. "Seriously?"

Their eyes meet.

Harry sets a pitfall trap below Tom's feet at the same moment that Tom buries Harry to the knees in a swamp.

The spells do not combine well, Harry thinks, laughing as they're both swept into a muddy trench.

Harry blasts a wave of muck at Tom's less-perfect-than-usual hair.

"Rude!" Riddle retaliates by summoning Harry's shoes, sweeping him off his feet and dunking him entirely under the bog.

Harry surfaces while Tom is scrambling out and attempts to follow, carrying at least twice his weight in mud. Tom only manages to kick him back in once.

"Did you have to be so accurate with the smell?" Harry complains, as he casts scourgify on himself to slough off the muck, and then at

Riddle without thinking about it.

Tom lets the spell hit with a raised eyebrow. “Have you forgotten what we’re doing, here?”

“No,” Harry lies.

“*Episkey*,” Riddle casts at him.

Harry flicks up a *protego* on reflex. “Was that actually a healing charm or have you figured out how to disguise a silent curse with the wand movement of another spell?”

“Why don’t you find out?” Tom dares.

Harry finds out. The healing spell is lightless, which makes it very difficult to dodge. The first hit grazes his elbow and heals the bloody scrapes there. Harry doesn’t let that stop him ducking back behind his shield.

Shielding isn’t easy either. Certainly, Harry could stand there and tank it, but he wouldn’t be able to cast back, and to win he’ll need to tag Tom more often than he gets tagged. They take turns, testing the water, building up speed until they’re duelling in earnest. The rhythm is in constant flux, because they’re both throwing in sneaky wandless charms timed to arrive just when the other drops his shield to return fire.

Harry has the edge with casting frequency, but Tom’s wandless casting is barely a twitch of his fingers, which is easy to overlook in the chaotic movement of the duel until Harry feels skin knit together. Harry ups the pace further and manages to tag Tom twice in a row after pinning his shoes with sticking charms first. And he’s so busy laughing like a smug prick about it that he gets nailed in the face by a diagnostic charm that proclaims him fully healed.

“Well, well. I believe that means I win,” Tom smirks.

“Does it though? I reckon I had fewer injuries to start with.”

But Tom is right and he knows it, all composed and put together. It makes Harry want to mess him up again.

And the swamp hole is *right there*.

“Don’t even think about it,” Tom glares, but the tide is tense with

something more like anticipation than anger.

Harry is already shrinking. He easily dodges a jinx and then Tom's hand as it grabs in slow motion.

In an instant, he's human shaped and laughing, tackling Riddle with enough momentum to knock the taller boy off his feet.

Tom shouts, tumbling backwards into the – the soft pile of leaves?!

Harry makes a *deeply* affronted noise, and then feels the need to repeat it as Riddle twists and escapes. Harry loses his grip on Tom's wrists and then it's over – Harry is pinned. His attack, once again, anticipated and backfired.

He tries to copy Tom's twisty trick, but he can't get the leverage against his longer limbs. The face grinning down at him looks far more amused than concerned by his efforts, which may be more accurately described as squirming than struggling. It's difficult to push away, even in sport, when his mind is blanketed in warmth and a matching heat lies on top of him. All he wants is closer.

"I should know better by now than to tackle people who grew up with siblings," Harry says.

"I grew up in an orphanage."

"If you tell me you didn't wrestle Hermione for the best books, I'm going to call you a liar."

"Maybe once or twice," Tom admits, and then that exact scene plays out behind Harry's eyes so clearly that Tom must be sharing a memory.

Harry is still laughing when he surges up to kiss him. He only makes it halfway before Tom is pressing back. They meet in the middle, too fast, too hard, but not enough. Harry slips Tom's grip and uses his freed hands to drag him down until Tom's full weight is on him. Heat explodes down to his toes.

The kiss is as raw as they are – brief, intense clashes of lips and teeth because they can't stop grinning, but if it's a bit sharp neither of them mind. In between they're just sharing air because they're both still panting from the fight, and this really isn't helping them recover. Tom's weight is a bit of a problem, if one considers breathing a top priority, which Harry is not inclined to do. He can't decide if he'd

rather tangle his fingers in Tom's hair, or trace his jaw from chin to ear, or feel his heart thumping in his chest against Harry's, so he does them all at once, until he starts to feel lightheaded.

Tom rises only as far as his elbows, enough for Harry to suck in a full breath. He presses his lips to Harry's cheek. "You are too tempting," he murmurs. He drops one shoulder to the ground, sliding that arm beneath Harry's head into his hair. Harry's hands go by reflex to his waist and their legs fold into a familiar tangle. Tom settles his head on Harry's shoulder and goes limp with a deep sigh.

For long minutes, they just focus on getting their breath back.

Harry stares at sky in disbelief. He has woken up from dreams like this, but now he is below clouds, not the red hangings of a four-post bed. His lips are tingling. That definitely just happened.

"What're you looking for?" Tom murmurs into his neck.

"I'm expecting post." Or smoke signals for swear words in morse code. Or fireworks spelling out a message a hundred feet long, something along the lines of 'Potter is a dunderhead - S. Snape'. But there's nothing. Zilch. Nada. Harry will cautiously consider that a good sign. Unless Snape is only waiting for nightfall to rearrange the stars to immortalise the message for the rest of eternity.

Ah. Tom's mind lights with realisation. *No, I don't expect so. Regulus has likely spoken with Snape by now. He trusts Snape.*

Harry feels Tom's attention move on. *Hold on, wait a minute* –

"You have something of mine," Tom says.

"What?"

Tom's long fingers wrap around Harry's wrist. He pulls the unresisting limb and kisses his fingers – right where they are holding Tom's wand. "Oh."

When did he even…? They could only have swapped when they were both disarmed. Which means – "You cast your first corporeal patronus in the presence of surprise dementors with an *unmatched* wand. *My* wand." Sweet fucking Merlin. Harry fingers twitch with the need to grab him. He would, if it wouldn't mean breaking Tom's grip. But his ear is *right there*, and it proves beyond temptation. Harry just can't. He seals his lips around the shell, tests it with his teeth.

“Ow,” Tom says unconvincingly.

“Shut up, it’s self-defence,” Harry mumbles.

The yew is lighter than holly. Harry turns it around to examine all sides. The difference between their wands is superficial, except for the feeling; his holly wand is always warm, this wand sends prickles up his arm and he’s not sure if he’s holding a bomb or not. Tom presses his lips to each knuckle, idly stroking over Harry’s pulse point.

“I can’t believe it listened to me,” Harry says, placing the wand on Tom’s chest. The expected anxiety about being unarmed barely registers.

“I can,” Tom says. “You disarmed me – the first person to accomplish that in *years*. Yew wands accept exceptional wizards. To them, having power is more important than how you wield it.” He’s making good use of his new access to Harry’s palm. The skin is still prickling and sensitive. A nibble sends a shudder through Harry. Tom grins and does it again. “Holly, on the other hand – very protective. It’s got a strong preference for fighting evil.” A stinging bite. “It’s stubborn.” A soothing lick. “And loyal.” Tom blows on the raw, damp skin and it goes from burning to freezing.

Then it is suddenly warm again, because Tom is holding his hand, the holly wand between them.

“But pragmatic enough to work with an ally in the right circumstances.”

Harry’s eyebrows shoot up. “Ally? Oh, because we just fought off a scourge of dementors together.”

Tom smiles enigmatically.

“…Right?”

“Do you forfeit?”

“Not on your life,” Harry says.

“Then you’ve left me with no choice. Our duel isn’t over. And even if it were, once would not be enough. I’m not done with you yet.” Tom grins and rolls back over. He braces on his hands above Harry, tantalisingly out of reach. “So you could say we have a common goal – nothing and no one is allowed to kill you but me.”

But Harry recognises when Riddle is performing by now. He is unsurprised when a thought overwrites it, made all the stronger by the eye contact: *I won't let anyone hurt you*. It is as adamant as a nesting dragon.

Then Tom whispers straight into Harry's mind words that are far too dangerous to say aloud. *We're getting out of here. I have a plan.*

Harry's breath stutters, head reeling. Before he can catch his breath, Tom drops.

"Oomph, you prat," Harry wheezes.

"Told you I'd get you back." Tom catches his gasp with his lips and kisses him twice as breathless.

It's another lousy kiss, objectively – it's hard to manage style when they're both laughing – and it's the best one Harry's ever had, beating out the previous by a narrow margin. Because beneath it is the implicit understanding that there will many more later to hone their skills. Years and years, as long as they want.

Tom practically purrs at the thought. His mind flashes through the things he wants to do with Harry once they're not being live streamed to all of Europe, and Harry isn't laughing now. There's a shared house, shared bed, but that is later. First there is rioting at the Ministry, Umbridge turfed out of Hogwarts, Grindelwald overthrown, Tom rising in this place. Tom and Harry fighting together, unstoppable.

Because Tom figured out how to get both. He chose Harry too.

Harry's chest burns, soon followed by his eyes. He pulls Tom close and that helps him feel like he isn't about to float away.

Harry was prepared to be seduced into a last huzzah. He was braced for carpe diem, not future talk, not –

Plan B: Rebellion.

Harry's stomach swoops up, then back down. *When? Before or after the third task?* What about his friends? He can't pick just one to take to the finale. *Fuck the Ministry's three survivors rule, I want to save them all.*

Alas, you do lack ambition. Let's burn the system to the ground. I want… Tom glances up with a flicker of annoyance. *We're out of time.*

Wait! What's your plan?

I'll explain later. I've wanted your input for some time. "Don't run off on me again. I won't wait another week for our rematch," Tom says for the cameras, standing up. He straightens his clothes, summons his jacket, and brushes off leaves and dirt in the same motion that a wandless *reparo* handles the tears and scorch marks.

Harry lays there, wide eyed and stunned.

The tide withdraws and Harry's mind feels far too empty. Harry lets his head fall back with a thunk and he tilts it further to watch Tom leave.

It's a near-perfect view.

Harry aims his wand at Tom's back and fires.

For one surprised second, Harry thinks it's going to hit. But then it bounces right back at him, and Harry accepts his due.

The expression Tom throws over his shoulder is pure exasperation.

Harry folds his hands under his now pink hair and grins unrepentantly. "Made you look."

Then Tom is gone and Harry savours the amused quirk of that mouth, the brightness in those eyes.

Made you look like that.

"Harry!"

Harry blinks. "Hermione. Hi."

"Oh, Merlin, are you okay? We saw patronuses – were there really *dementors*? That's unheard of – but then more spells so we thought you were fine, until it stopped, and then – *what happened here*?"

"Questions later. Get him out," Krum's gruff voice cuts in. "It is not safe. Others will come."

"I'm fine," Harry sits up among the scattered leaves and looks around. He's in the epicentre of a crater near several uprooted trees. The underbrush where the dementors gathered is withered and dead. The frost is melting. Everything smells like wet ash and decay.

The details hadn't mattered before, beyond being a tripping hazard or safe ground. He can see why Hermione has questions. He's going to cop the full inquisition treatment later. But Krum is right – the Supremacists will be drawn to the sounds looking for stragglers to pick off, if they're not already nearby watching like Harry's allies were.

"Just as well we didn't duel earlier. We would've levelled the castle," Harry mutters, rolling slowly to his feet. His muscles feel rubbery, and he knows he's going to feel very second-hand tomorrow.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Hermione says softly.

"What for?"

"I know you were hoping he'd be more amenable."

Harry blinks. Looks around at the carnage. "Ah. I can see how you'd think this was bad news."

"It *isn't*?"

"No one died?"

Hermione puts her hands on her hips. "For lack of trying, or…?"

"Well…" Harry flounders for a way to say that Tom tried to feed him to a pack of giant hyenas and Harry turned them into grenades while Tom was incapacitated by pepper spray, which might *sound* like sincere murder attempts, but it was actually flirting, if not foreplay, without sounding completely unhinged.

"Did you find out what you needed?" Fleur asks. "How did it end?"

"It was a stalemate," Tom says.

They whirl around as he emerges from the bedraggled trees, his backpack slung over one shoulder.

'Later' is much sooner than Harry expected. "That was not what I thought you meant."

"Why waste more time? I came prepared." Tom strolls to a comfortable speaking distance, ignoring the wands aimed at him. "So is anyone welcome to join your alliance?"

Chapter End Notes

This monster length chapter contains a few of the first scenes I wrote. I was on a roll of watching Jill Bearup analyse flirty fights and tried to write one. Loved it so much, I decided I had to write the rest of the romance that goes with it. The original outline was rivals-to-lovers without the lovers part.
I was also inspired by: Oliver Wood / Marcus Flint for that rivals-to-lovers-without-losing-the-rivals-bit dynamic e.g. “Boxing Day” by ramathorne and especially “The Perfect Match” by lady_mahadevi, and the patronus scenes and how the characters deal with trauma in “The Potions and Promises of the Half-Blood Prince” by elliebennett

Side note: my favourite lines in the whole story are in this chapter (Made you look / made you look like that. God, Harry is a sap).

Harry: I want to save all my friends, fuck the Ministry.
Tom: It’s good for your first try, I love the sentiment, but can I get that rebellion with a side of arson, please?

Ministry: oh shit Potter and Riddle are way more powerful than we thought. They need to die right now and it doesn’t look like they’re going to do each other in. Someone Fix It.
Gamemakers: Potter testified under veritaserum that dementors are his greatest weakness, and neither of them showed up to patronus lessons, and they’re currently distracted.
That one employee that got in on smarts instead of nepotism: But rumours say Potter taught the patronus.
Gamemakers: Children brag. Even if he can cast it in a classroom, it doesn’t mean he can survive dozens of dementors. We have testimony. He said he was helpless! Yo Minister, can you order your soul-sucking demons to sub in?
Grindelwald: gladly.
Ministry: muahaha roll cameras, cue boss music!
Ministry: wait, why are we hearing the boss music?

I handed in my thesis, slept for a week, and now I’m catching up on all the weekends I haven’t had since May. Also annual leave. Expect updates to start again in November-December.

Leap of faith

Chapter Summary

> Fresh from beating the crap out of each other, Tom now wants to join Harry's alliance. Let's see how that goes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione blinks. “I’m sorry, what? You want to – *what?*”

Tom doesn’t take his eyes off Harry. “I want to join your alliance.”

Fleur is suspicious. “Why?”

“It isn’t only up to me, Riddle.” Harry drags his eyes to the others, and only then does Tom seem to remember that their existence matters. “Well?” Harry asks them. They’ve fanned out either side of him, far enough to avoid most area affect spells and crossfire.

Tom couldn’t defeat Harry alone. Together, the alliance could pose a real threat, but from the casual way Riddle is standing, he’d sooner expect Fenrir to swallow the moon than their threat be realised.

“We will not negotiate while you hold a weapon of mass destruction,” Hermione says. Her wand is trained on his backpack.

Tom tilts his head. “Would that not be the purpose of negotiation – to ensure it doesn’t come to such drastic measures?”

Only Harry seems to realise that was a hypothetical rather than a threat, but he supposes that was Riddle’s intention. He relaxes his occlumency enough to let Tom pick up on his mingled amusement and impatience. “Merlin, you are such an older brother.”

“Excuse you. I didn’t only torment the kids younger than me.”

“You’re an equal opportunity terror, my apologies,” Harry says, but his full attention isn’t in the banter – he has questions, and there isn’t anything to distract him from the promised explanations. With Tom around, it’s hard to be worried about any dangerous creature that could sniff them out.

Tom echoes his anticipation, but Harry can feel it warring with the instant entertainment of shit stirring. The delay apparently isn't worth it, "I suppose I do have better things to do," Tom says, followed by a once-over that falls somewhere between suggestive and blatant.

Harry smothers a blush. Tom offers his hand and Harry steps forward to take it before anyone can curse him for so much as twitching.

What are you planning now?

In answer, Tom trails his fingers up, shifting the grip to their wrists. "I swear I will not release the basilisk with the intent to harm anyone currently in this clearing."

Oh, he's serious. Harry's breath stutters, then seizes along with every muscle as the magic catches up with the vow. Tom's power surges through them, rising as a corona around their hands.

"Satisfied now, Hermione?" Tom asks.

Harry doesn't hear her answer. He's not sure Tom does either, as the corona sinks back into their skin and sets them shivering. The last time his palm tingled like that, it was because Tom had his mouth on it, playing his nerves like a fiddle. He is hard pressed to recall why they stopped.

Harry only realises he has licked his lips when he is startled by the slight swelling. He wonders if Riddle's are the same. They weren't gentle before the others arrived. If Harry presses his lower lip between his teeth, he can almost feel Tom on him – Tom, who is staring like a Chinese fireball after breaking its winter fast.

Instead of the usual coherent message, Tom sends a rapid flurry of images and emotions which only resolve into words at the end, like a badly connected floo call. *Desire – caution: witnesses? – may I?*

Harry tugs their hands and tilts his chin up. He doesn't intend to hide this from his friends.

Tom steps in, smoothly sliding his grip from wrist to shoulder to claim his kiss. And it is a claim. Tom's mind is alight with pride, with the satisfaction of finally being recognised as Tom-and-Harry, a unit. So naturally Harry has to kiss him again, because he wants one of those too.

Harry revels in the novelty. It is so soft this time, with their teeth held

back, at least until Harry's tongue darts out to test his theory. He can't tell if Riddle's lips are swollen but that hardly matters when he has discovered a new dimension to explore – *taste* – and Tom retaliates by sinking his teeth into the exact spot which is still tender from Harry's own.

Embarrassment rises through Tom's mind before he brushes it aside, unconcerned. It takes a moment for Harry to realise that the foreign feeling didn't belong to either of them – Tom is mentally monitoring their company.

Harry freezes. "Er." He reflects that he could've broken the news more politely. He turns a sheepish grin over his shoulder. Cedric is making a study of the clouds while Hermione pinches the bridge of her nose. "Sorry, guys."

Tom sneaks a kiss to his temple. "They have eyelids."

Harry slaps his chest without looking. He feels Tom's grin stretch against his skin before the hit even lands. "There are children present."

"There were children watching earlier," he points out.

"…Fuck."

"Language!" Riddle shakes with silent laughter, "Think of the children!"

Harry digs in with fingers to really make him squirm. It turns into a brief wrestling match until Harry is struck numb with horror. Tom easily pins his arms in a loose bear hug. "*Fuck*, my godfather just saw us snog." Harry slumps and drops his forehead onto Tom's shoulder to complete the portrait of Mortification and Despair. "And uncle Remus and Regulus. Molly and Arthur. McGonagall and Dumbledore and *Snape*."

"There, there," Tom says with a palpable lack of sympathy. "They could've caught us sneaking out the dorms instead."

"Ohmygod why are you like this."

Tom meets Fleur's eyes over the head of The Despair, perhaps because she's the only one who can without blushing. "Still want me to tell you why I'm here, or does that answer your questions?"

“Not as many as it raises,” she says dryly. Her eyes narrow. “Although I have to wonder how long you intend this relationship to last.”

His arms tighten. “Until one of us dies, of course.”

Harry damn near swallows his tongue. He can’t believe Tom said that aloud. He’s lucky his face is still planted in Tom’s chest, where his expression won’t immediately reveal the double meaning. When he can breathe again, he makes sure to bite a collarbone in retribution.

Tom just shakes with laughter, the wanker. He scratches a line of fire down Harry’s spine with his ring finger.

Harry shivers. Tom is playing a very dangerous game, waving a flag at the Ministry that could set them off if they spot it, and Harry enjoys the thrill just as much as he does, but there’s more at stake. If playing too close to the edge ruins Plan B when the alternative is Tom seeking victory at any cost…

“Threats will not help you plead your case,” Fleur says.

Harry closes his eyes in relief –hopefully the native English speakers missed it too– only for his eyes to snap open when Cedric gasps. He shoots a quelling look over his shoulder. Cedric can ask exactly what intentions were just declared later, when it won’t enlighten the entire world to the performance. After Harry gets a chance to wrangle the details of the Plan out of Tom to figure out if this performance is actually critical.

Cedric’s mouth clicks shut over his questions. Good man. Cedric knows them both fairly well and he’s more perceptive than most, but he won’t be the only one with suspicions. Yet Tom seems more concerned with tracing Harry’s trapezius muscle through his jacket than anything else.

You’re not fooling everybody, Harry warns.

Yes, Tom agrees. The satisfaction takes Harry by surprise. *And they will draw the most obvious conclusion – that I can’t let you go.*

Harry’s mind spins to the next step. *They’ll think that you’re only pretending to be a murderous victor, that you’ll betray the Ministry’s wishes in the end to keep me alive.*

And feel quite vindicated. People stop looking when they think they’ve uncovered your secrets.

So they won't suspect a revolution. But it comes at a cost. *Your sponsors –*

Will flock to Bellatrix in droves. Perhaps the gamemakers will finally let them do something useful.

"We know you have no trouble following through on your threats," Hermione says.

"If you're referring to Davies, I did you a favour."

"You're not conflicted at all," she marvels.

"Your point?"

"What's to stop you killing the rest of us?"

"You only swore not to use the basilisk," Fleur points out.

"And it is obvious that you only care about Harry."

"I have a vested interest in Harry's cooperation, which is predicated on your collective wellbeing."

"J'hallucine! That is callous."

Or not callous *enough*. It's a bit too sentimental for Harry's peace of mind. Tom is eminently practical. If he has a use for them, he will have incentive to keep them alive. But he has made less than no effort to endear himself, he isn't airing the you've-got-something-I-want charm. It's, what, a show of honesty? Impatience with always wearing masks? Harry wants to trust it, and almost does, but he's not the one at risk. Tom might just not want anything from them, and that's dangerous.

Tom sighs. He tilts Harry's chin up to meet his eyes. *I knew they'd put you in protective mode again.*

I can't afford to be wrong. Inviting an enemy of Riddle's calibre into camp would be disastrous.

No one gets to hurt you. Losing them would cut you deeply. I found a use for them since they'll be staying. Tom's mind rings with promise.

Harry is bombarded with hazy imaginations: the alliance following Harry into battle against aurors – Hermione and Tom writing out spell derivations with Krum commenting on the arithmancy – and

some kind of distraction? There are a dozen more pictures in quick succession, but it's too much information, meaningless without the context to parse it.

"Tom, Harry – if you could *focus* for one moment," Hermione says archly.

Tom's impatience blazes straight past hers, abruptly at its limit.

Harry spins in his arms. "Sorry, Hermione," he smiles winningly, squeezing Tom's wrists in warning, pressing them tightly across his own chest.

"I wasn't going to curse her," Tom murmurs. It's truer now that the initial impulse has passed and his pragmatism has reasserted itself. It's now holding him back more than Harry, like it does every other time he gets a murderous urge. Or most times.

Harry says nothing very loudly.

"…technically, jinxes are not curses."

Was that so hard to admit? Harry leans into him more, idly tracing the raised paths of tendons and veins until Tom shivers and his arms tense, suddenly iron, which is – hmm. Harry wrenches his mind back on track lest her complaints gain some merit.

Less lethal, but no less impatient, Tom turns back to Hermione, "Fine – let's negotiate. I offer my full support until we are the only champions left standing."

"Who is 'we'?" Amelia narrows her eyes.

Tom hums with surprised approval, but that doesn't soften his toothy grin in the slightest. "Me and Harry. You don't want to know what'll happen if he dies before I'm satisfied."

"Stop trying to turn them into my bodyguards," Harry says. *I do not need Amelia distracted by worrying about me the next time we're in a scrape.*

"In return," Tom continues, ignoring him, "I require several hours of uninterrupted time with Harry each day to duel or spend however we choose."

Hermione eyes Harry askance.

He's amazed she thinks she needs to ask. "What? You wouldn't be asking anything of me that I wouldn't do anyway."

"Harry! You don't admit that in a negotiation!"

He deliberately scans himself, lingering on the places he is propping up Tom's weight, incidentally nuzzling the chin hooked over his shoulder. "Oh darn. If only I hadn't said anything. He'd never have guessed."

Hermione collects herself with a sniff, ignoring Harry's snickering with the ease of long practice. "What would your full support look like?"

"My wand in a fight. Information on the Supremacists. I'll share my supplies, including one Limitless Lunchbox, former property of Bellatrix Black. Pinky promise I haven't hexed it."

It's far more than he needs to offer. Just poaching him away from the Supremacists would be too good an opportunity to pass up, and Krum knows it. He examines the residual spell carnage of their duel with a tactical eye. "We probably cannot beat the Supremacists if he fights on their side. Not without Ganz, and she will not cooperate with us. We would need to take risks. There could be heavy losses."

"Trusting Tom would also be a pretty big risk, even if he doesn't stab us in the back. The Ministry are going to utterly lose their minds," Hermione points out. "Is the advantage against the Supremacists worth the hassle?"

Tom's mind lights up with satisfaction, more than his usual delight in causing authority figures great consternation. It's not a side effect, Harry realises, Ministry hostility is part of the plan.

Tom hums confirmation. He catches Harry's gaze out of the corner of his eye. *Angry and desperate people make mistakes. Let's help them along.* He grins, all feral delight, teeth bared next to Harry's throat. Harry's mouth goes dry. "We can take anything they throw at us. You saw our patronuses – that is what our brother wands can do against a common threat."

Roger would've had something to say about daring them to do worse, but if it was anyone else's chief concern, they would've left with him.

"Well, it isn't as if the gamemakers weren't already gunning for us," Cedric says.

Riddle tilts his head. “Oh, I almost forgot – let me join and I’ll remove Diggory’s imperius. But that is more self-interest than bribe, if I’m sleeping near him, you understand.”

Cedric freezes. Ah, so he is still cursed.

“*You* cast it!” Amelia gasps.

“No,” Tom says flatly. He doesn’t look at her, eyes fixed on Cedric. His body is a tension coil at Harry’s back, ready for anything.

“Then how can you –”

“Recall that I am a legilimens.”

Hermione looks between Tom and Harry with dawning realisation. Harry winks.

“I hadn’t, actually,” Amelia gamely stands her ground. Merlin, she’s got nerve. “Is that supposed to be a point in your favour?”

“Perhaps not in Hufflepuff arithmetic. Consider that the theoretical threat I present cancels out the very real threat currently biding his time.”

Harry can tell where Cedric’s decision to bluff or attack has fallen by the way Tom relaxes moments before Cedric splutters, “I am not a threat!”

The fresh crater they’re standing in might’ve had something to do with his prudence. Cedric’s eyes dart to the forest.

“Can you free him now?” Harry asks quietly as Cedric continues to protest his innocence. It does not stop Krum confiscating his wand.

“It would take a while. Best not to linger here.”

“Right.” But Fleur and Hermione are staring down Tom like they could interrogate him all day (ask Harry how he knows). His feet itch to get moving. At some point, they have to stop asking and take action. “So is Tom coming with us?”

Harry made up his mind the moment he noticed the backdrop to Tom’s planned fight for the alliance against the aurors was in the halls of the Ministry. Tom is planning on getting *all* of them out of the arena.

“Are you certain we can trust him?” Fleur asks.

Harry glances down. He realises he’s still holding Tom’s wrists, and not just because he wants to. He doesn’t know how Tom would’ve dealt with Cedric if it was necessary. Probably non-lethally. Probably.

“I…”

Tom is promising the thing Harry wants most; to get out with everyone alive. If he was going to manipulate Harry with a gambit he can’t refuse, it’d be this one. All Harry can do at this point is hope it isn’t too good to be true and keep an eye out for any hits as they come.

“I believe Riddle deserves a chance,” Krum says quietly. The allies startle at the abrupt end to the silence. The surprise only grows when they process his words. “More importantly, *Harry* clearly believes it.” Hermione bites her lip. Fleur raises an eyebrow. Krum scowls at them. “We agreed Harry had the best chance of learning his intentions. It is not fair to put that decision on his shoulders because we trust his judgement, then question that judgement in the name of caution when we have relieved ourselves the risk of being wrong by shifting the burden.”

Harry swallows thickly.

“The only thing left to decide is whether letting him join is worth upsetting the gamemakers,” Krum concludes. “I think it will be.”

Hermione stares for a long moment. “You’re right, I’m sorry, Harry.” He nods, appreciating it. “And I agree – Tom’s talent will likely make up for the added pressure.”

“So do I,” Amelia says.

“I suppose I don’t get an opinion,” Cedric crosses his arms.

Indeed, he does not. “You’re in, Riddle,” Fleur says.

And the alliance grows by one more.

Tom hums. “Seven strong. An auspicious number.” *You can add that as another reason I’m keen to keep them alive*, he adds helpfully.

…

“You are aware that Bellatrix knows you are using tree houses now,

yes?" Tom eyes the ladder with distaste. Harry can't tell if he's worried about discovery or put off by the height.

"I am more concerned that the radar is near critical level," Fleur says.

"They will be able to narrow down which stretch of trees we're in very soon. Bella will likely fetch the matches."

Height it is.

Harry squeezes his shoulder. "Do you reckon you could enchant our windows to show the view from ground level so we can see things coming under the canopy?"

"That would be helpful," Krum says. "An outdoor sentry can still get the height advantage."

And if it also makes Tom more comfortable, all the better.

Tom tilts his head as he considers the problem. "It's possible."

Harry pats his back, then while the others climb, he flies up to sweep the tent for anything nasty lying in wait.

"Well, this is cosy." Tom sticks his nose in each room briefly, then beelines for the kitchen. He frowns at the eggs. He reaches into his bag and a quick summoning charm fetches the lunchbox.

Harry is mildly terrified. "Any chance your hand is not going to come back out one day?"

"Not really," but he doesn't elaborate. He taps the tin with his wand, "Stromboli." Opening the lid releases a delicious smell. A quick levitation spell later, and he tosses the lunchbox to Harry. "Here, I'm sure I worked up your appetite."

"No denying that," Harry mutters. His mind blanks on anything that isn't fish or weeds for a long moment. "Chicken Kiev. And treacle tart. What? Some of us have been eating out of the lake for a week." When Harry's poison detection spells come back clean, he hands the tin to Amelia and conjures another chair at the table beside Tom.

Tom digs in, ignoring the others' growing excitement over the food.

The chicken is delicious. Harry hums and hooks an ankle around Tom's. His toes brush the backpack, and he can't resist checking that the zip is entirely closed. "Are you just going to leave that lying

around?”

Riddle shrugs. “Only I can open it and nothing short of fiendfyre will destroy it.”

Harry raises an eyebrow. Given the opportunity to elaborate (read: brag), Tom will usually oblige.

Sure enough, “It’s protected by a password you’ll never guess. It isn’t English.”

Harry tilts his head. “How many languages do you speak?”

“Fluently? Hmm, Latin isn’t really spoken but I’ll count it anyway – so, five.”

Latin for spell craft, presumably, and it follows that another is likely, “Greek?”

“Yes.”

There are thousands of other languages for just as many cultures throughout history, but those two are the biggest contributors to British magic.

“Old Norse?”

“Not enough to claim fluency.”

“Gaelic?”

“Same.”

“A different Celtic language?”

“No.”

“Hmm.” Harry steeples his fingers. That covers most of the rest of British spellcraft, except for the period where the Normans blended in a bunch of their magic and language. It’s still something of a status symbol, and on top of English and Latin, it wouldn’t take much effort to learn. “French.”

Tom’s grin widens. “Yes. Last one.”

“I know that look.” Sneaky with a side of smug delight. It’s either going to be very easy to overlook, or so out of left field that Harry

might as well go through them alphabetically. “I don’t stand a chance of guessing it, do I?”

Tom hums noncommittally.

“What continent is it spoken on – wait, *is* it still spoken?”

“Yes,” *in all but seven countries and all continents bar Antarctica.*

Harry is pretty sure even English isn’t that widespread. The puzzle is just as delicious as his meal. He turns it over in his mind, briefly stumped, before he realises that almost anywhere there are wizards, there are house elves and banks.

Elvish? Gobbledegook?

Older.

Now *that* snags his curiosity by the scruff. A language older than agriculture, older than all known writing, but then how did it survive for over ten thousand years and remain similar enough to still be the same language? No human languages lasted that long, so it must be magical. Presumably also sensitive, secret or private since Tom shifted to legilimency.

Harry is staring into the middle distance when he catches movement out the corner of his eye.

Tom snatches his hand back from the tart barely quick enough to escape impalement via fork. The thud into the wood startles everyone out of their conversations.

“You asking to go another few rounds?” Harry bares his teeth, well aware this is exactly the reaction Tom was trying to provoke. But he could never allow treacle tart to be wasted on someone who doesn’t have a sweet tooth.

Riddle leans in. “We do have unfinished business.”

“Not inside,” Hermione orders.

“Mhmm,” Harry agrees. He freezes with the last bit of tart halfway to his mouth. It’s a crazy idea. But it makes the puzzle – so many puzzles around Tom, especially Bellatrix – make too much sense. *Does your language predate humans?*

Tom grins, blinking slowly like a cat. Or a reptile. *Only by about a*

hundred million years.

Harry drops the tart. *How the **fuck** did you learn parseltongue?*

Now that is something to discuss in private. Tom's mind stirs, waves building, heralding a storm he looks delighted to weather. "Rain check on that imperius removal," Tom tells the others, gaze affixed to Harry. "We're going to step out for a bit. Try not to let Diggory kill anyone. Mind the improvised garrot he hid in his sleeping bag."

Harry falters.

No, come with me. I want to tell you the plan. There are things I won't reveal to the others.

But Cedric –

Trust them to handle him. They've managed all day.

He's got a point, but Harry still hesitates. *Can't you tell me here, now? They're not interrupting us*.

I could, but where's the fun in that? Amusement twists the waves into playful, unpredictable eddies. *We need an excuse to raise privacy wards and stare into each other's eyes without speaking. A meal would do it, or…*

Covert snogging – are you serious?

Utterly serious, Tom somehow manages to keep a straight face. *So, what do you say?*

It's so unnecessary. Merlin, Harry loves this man.

Harry retrieves his lost piece of treacle tart. He leans back to savour it. "I dunno, you've got stiff competition. I could go for seconds," he says, and slowly sucks his fingers clean.

Tom goes utterly still, a credible impression of a predator about to pounce.

Harry's eyes glint wickedly.

"For Merlin's sake," Hermione says.

"How have they gotten worse since training?" Cedric mutters. "They *just* had it out!"

“You,” Tom murmurs with deadly intent, “are trying my patience.”

Harry’s eyebrows leap skywards. “Who, me?” He clutches his chest because he can’t contain his shock. Then he slowly stretches towards the lunchbox.

“Don’t.” Getting deadlier, and really, how is Harry supposed to resist.

“*Accio*.”

Tom lunges but Harry’s arm shrinks faster. The lunchbox clatters into his seat over the lingering sound of Harry’s cackles. He flies for the rafters, feints through the doorway just ahead of the barrier Tom casts to block him in. He doesn’t think he’s going to make it to the next one in time, but the tent ropes come alive. The unoccupied chairs throw themselves in Tom’s path. It’s only a split-second distraction, but it’s enough. It’s not the situation Harry envisioned when he animated everything in case Cedric attacked, but he can’t argue with the results.

Once he hits open air, Harry really ramps up speed, but he is still within the ward boundary when an animagus-reversal spell sails past close enough to rustle his feathers. That was a warning. Harry decides he would rather be on the ground than a dozen metres up, especially if his wand could come in handy in the near future. Tom’s expression screams kiss, kick or curse, with even odds on which he’ll do first, until he comes impractically close for cursing – *unnervingly* close.

Harry holds his ground as Tom stalks nearer. Any hint of weakness will be pounced upon instantly. He raises an eyebrow, aiming for that indolent confidence. Who’s bothered? Not Harry. He’s got this entirely under control. But he must’ve missed his mark, because Tom smirks.

Uh oh. “I don’t think my behaviour is the issue here. Judging by that little display, I reckon you’ve got no patience for me to try,” Harry, on the back foot, says in a last-ditch attempt to provoke him. A reactive Tom is slightly more predictable.

“Patience? I’ve been patient. I’ve been a *saint*.” Tom steps closer. If he just leant forward– but he doesn’t.

Harry’s pulse is pounding in his ears. He half expects Tom to attack him once he’s too close to defend. It’s something Harry would do. He respects Riddle’s abilities enough to resort to dirty tricks, and he knows that goes both ways.

Harry is lightheaded but damn proud that he hasn’t backed down an

inch by the time Tom closes the distance, trailing a hand from his shoulder to the back of his neck, tangling in his hair.

“Shall we continue where we left off?” he purrs.

Harry licks his lips, trying to concentrate. “What, teasing you? Yeah, I could go again.”

The grip tightens. Harry leans into it, tilting his head back with a gasp.

“I’m not so sure you could.” Tom’s breath ghosts over his bared neck. Harry shudders. “If you tease me, I’ll tease you.”

Harry wavers on the edge. There’s still a chance he can get Tom to crack first. But Tom digs in his nails, and – fuck it – he knows when he’s beaten. “Wards.”

“Hmmm, yes, let’s avoid any more dementor surprises.” Tom steps back reluctantly, and Harry can breathe again.

“That too,” Harry says, wry, as he sets a wider ring of danger alerts than the perimeter Fleur’s wards already cover. He hesitates at the privacy spells. He’s not sure which is worse: letting everyone watch, or closing the proverbial curtain for their wild imaginations to fill in the blanks. Rita Skeeter will get a kick out of this. *My friends think we’re having sex, don’t they?*

Almost certainly. But the audience won’t. The omnioculars are enchanted to see and hear through the basic privacy wards they taught us. With that, Tom traces the privacy circle.

Harry eyes the ward. *You’d know more than the basics.*

Any stronger and they might suspect we have something to hide.

We do have something to hide. Harry ogles Tom’s arse just to make him snort. But the message is clear: don’t discuss Plan B aloud. He appreciates the warning, in any case. *Okay, then all clothes stay on.* Harry eyes Tom’s chest, the armoured jacket taught across his shoulders. He reconsiders the merits of eyelids on prudes. *Maybe only most clothes.*

Hands above the belt, Tom agrees. *Even with wards, we must stay alert.*

Harry checks their protections with a few detection spells he’d use if

he was trying to break in. Their little spot is locked down tight.

A branch snaps underfoot. Harry's neck prickles. Tom has stepped out of his sight.

Harry can't seem to draw a full breath before he needs to suck in air again. He closes his eyes to focus his hearing for another hint, or a scent, or a –

A light brush against his back feels like it burns.

"Is everything to your satisfaction?" Tom asks.

Hands grip Harry's waist. His breath hitches. "Yes. Do carry on."

"If you insist." Riddle steps forward, pressing himself in a hot brand down Harry's back.

Harry turns his head for a kiss, but Tom avoids it, tagging his cheek instead. He hasn't quite finished getting his revenge, then. Harry damn near groans. Regardless of who started it, Harry needs a kiss or answers or *something* or he's going to die of frustration.

Come on, you wanted a captive audience – you've got me, let's hear it. Harry leans into him. He can feel Tom's excitement like a weighted blanket. *Impress me.*

Tom is as susceptible as ever. *Oh, I'll impress you. With my plan we can take down the Games, the Ministry, all of it.*

So far you're all talk. Harry angles for a kiss but he is foiled again. *Put your money where your mouth is. Or put your mouth where my mouth is.*

Tom kisses a line down his jaw. The tide curls in satisfaction when Harry drops his head back onto his shoulder.

Fuck, that works too, Harry thinks, and then, more intentionally; *Go on then, how are we overthrowing the government?*

It's unstable. Add enough chaos and it'll fall over. That'll be the easy part. Holding it for more than an hour, now, that's the trick. But it's anticipation, not dread, buzzing in Tom's mind, pressing on Harry's. He's practically preening. *I have people in place, some ready to start trouble and others poised to take advantage.*

That sounds familiar. *The people you shuffled in when you toppled Umbridge off her high horse.*

Them and more. Umbridge was just the latest scandal, my greatest yet.

It's not as if scandals are rare, with the amount of corruption in the Ministry. In just the last year, Regulus's boss was caught embezzling department funds and his boss's boss was one of several officials revealed to be a patron of a particularly infamous Nocturn brothel. Noble purebloods, both of them, so there were no real consequences, they just retired long enough for the public outcry to die down, then shuffled along to other departments, albeit less powerful ones.

Leaving Regulus to run the department.

Regulus, who Tom knew well enough to be able to contact him with the tip-off about Pettigrew when even Harry could not. Who also knows enough of what Tom is doing to allay Snape's you-suicidal-little-idiot lecture that Harry has more than earned.

Harry's mouth falls open. *Sonofabitch. You!*

I was Regulus's intern last summer. Tom smirks into Harry's neck, hiding the flash of teeth that he can't contain. *He soon learnt to introduce me to all sorts of people. It's not the done thing, for someone of my status, but he was the only lord willing to work with me. In hindsight, essential for our new plans. I must reward him.*

Merlin, if that's what Tom can accomplish by delivering coffee, maybe they can pull this off.

Give me a few years and I could take the Ministry down from the inside, Tom says, pressing quick, excited kisses that draw inexorably closer to Harry's lips. *That was the original plan. I was going to emerge as the most famous victor in centuries, build a reputation as a reliable leader, then use the controversy of the next Games to rally the masses to my cause while my agents cripple them from within. A coup, seven years from now. But there was a critical flaw in that plan – sole victor. I'm a greedy man, Harry. Toppling a regime isn't enough for me. I want you by my side.*

Harry's breathing speeds up, even though he'd pieced most of it together after Tom upended the old plan. Survivors leave two possibilities, and if Tom really means for the alliance to openly fight the aurors, that nixes one of them. Good. *I wasn't looking forward to faking my death for seven years.*

I couldn't keep my hands off you for seven days. No, Tom tightens his grip, curling around his mind and body. *We accelerate the timeframe. We act now.*

“Merlin,” Harry gasps. He clenches his hand in Tom’s hair, urging him closer, holding him and the treason safe and quiet, encouraging his lips to move where Harry wants them most. Tom stops just short, at the corner of his mouth. Harry catches a glimpse – Riddle is far from composed, pupils blown wide.

But they don’t have the years that Tom required to organise a coup from within the regime, so what must they do instead? There’s probably a reason it wasn’t Tom’s first choice. Except, while he’s dragging the explanation out, it feels more like gloating than stalling. They’re approaching a precipice, Harry realises. After the slow climb, Tom is ready to enjoy the dramatic payoff to his teasing, to finally reveal all. He just needs a little push.

How?

Escape the arena, mobilise chaos to keep the aurors occupied, then provoke our illustrious leader into a challenge he can’t ignore.

Harry should’ve known that asking outright wouldn’t get him answers any quicker. *Technically those are goals, not plans.*

I’m getting there, you cheeky shit. Tom moves further from his mouth again in payback. Teeth scrape around Harry’s ear. He tenses and Tom’s hold tightens. Harry squirms, just to revel in the strength of it – inescapable, and that’s a delicious thought.

Carry on then. Harry says, leaning in. Tom avoids him, just far enough to give Harry hope of catching up. *Far be it for me to interrupt a Slytherin on a monologue.*

Trying to provoke me? Riddle presses a grin into Harry’s temple.

Is it working?

Tom slides his hands down, and Harry jolts as searing heat lands where his shirt has ridden up.

Yes.

His fingers stroke over Harry’s stomach excruciatingly slowly, making his abs clench and forcing him to hold his breath, drawing it out until he is dizzy. Then Tom finally, *finally*, presses his lips to Harry’s – for one brief, maddening second, before retreating and laughing when Harry is too boneless to chase it.

“You are evil,” Harry says, voice hoarse.

“Oh, you noticed?” The tide dances mischievously, and Harry can’t take any more. He swipes a leg out, tucks, and throws Tom over his shoulder. He lands heavily on his back and Harry follows him down in a tangle of limbs. *Shock–arousal–fascination–thrill–lust–* Tom is leaking a scrambled mess of emotions, and any dregs of patience are lost in the whirlwind. Tom drags Harry down into a searing kiss.

Maybe there’s something to be said for anticipation making things sweeter. Harry savours it – the warmth, the taste, his glasses digging into their faces. He adjusts the angle with a slick slide and then it’s even better.

“Merlin, the things you do to me,” Tom says. His breath tickles Harry’s skin, making his lips tingle, and he has to press their mouths together in order to bare it.

Tom slides one hand up the back of Harry’s shirt, the other into his hair. Harry pulls against it and Tom indulges him, scratching his scalp while urging him closer. Tom shifts so Harry can settle his weight without laying directly on his crotch – good idea. Must remember they’re in a murder forest surrounded by cameras. But that seems entirely less important to Harry than suddenly finding himself with a hand freed from holding himself up, itching to explore.

Tom shivers and Harry grins. *Weren’t you monologuing? Extoling your master plan to pull off a coup without enough people?*

Right. Tom rallies, briefly. *We do have enough.*

Not to crack open the Ministry.

Not from the outside, no. But we won’t be on the outside. The heart attack curse triggers the portkeys.

Harry loses his balance. Only Tom’s grip prevents their faces colliding in a far from sexy manner. Tom snickers.

Roger Davies – that was a test! He can see the pieces coming together. The portkeys deposit corpses in the Ministry, straight past the main defences. If Tom found a way to ensure they get the counter-curse before the point of no return… Oh, that deserves a reward. Harry starts at Tom’s chin, just a peck to push his head back. Tom stretches obligingly.

Testing the curse was necessary. I wasn't certain how long it would take for the portkey to activate. Instantaneous is perfect. Ten minutes without the counter-curse and we'd–

Harry traces the jugular vein with a finger, then the carotid artery, down one side and up the other. Tom's hands spasm and relax. Harry can't help but see the most vulnerable points. He knows exactly where to stab or cut or punch, from fighting and healing lessons both. He kisses Tom's pulse point – just rests there until he can feel it slow slightly, the instinctive unease lessening. Then, filled with the urge to speed it up again, he sucks a little, scrapes with his teeth.

Tom's throat bobs and he hisses unintelligibly.

Monologuing, Harry reminds him, smiling into his skin. *There'd better be a place for my friends in this plan.*

Tom sighs as Harry turns his attention to feeling up his chest, pressing into the caress like a cat. He admits, *I may have an academic problem that could use some fresh eyes. Hermione's, for a start.*

Oh?

We must alter the spell so that the curse and counter-curse are linked. Otherwise we would have to rely on Regulus getting in position to save us. Too much could go wrong.

Linked? Like ward chains? He's still not exactly sure how Fleur got through the entwined nullification and paralysis wards on the loot from the acromantula nest.

No, that doesn't– Tom cuts himself off, memory flashing to Harry applying a protego like the disillusionment spell just because it seemed right, to him deflecting a shield piercer by taking advantage of refraction which Harry is only learning at this moment is a technique with a name and everything. Tom narrows his eyes suspiciously.

Harry blinks. A grin slowly stretches his face.

Suspicion morphs into a deadly glare.

Harry beams. Because he could spout almost any magical nonsense and Tom will be helpless to question it against his better judgement, at least for a moment, and oh, *that* is power.

"Harry." The warning rumbles through his chest into Harry's.

Harry leans into it, because he has never seen a danger sign he hasn't wanted to poke. "You wouldn't fault me for using any power of mine for evil, would you?"

Harry catches the fist that jabs at his kidneys, turns so that the swipe at his nose only glances off his cheek, and kicks a leg out just in time to prevent Tom rolling them over like he did after their duel. He heaves his weight forward, slamming Tom back into the grass, arms pinned either side of his head. He isn't going anywhere for the next few seconds with the breath knocked out of him, especially after Harry resettles to pin his thighs, so Harry leans over his ear, whispers, "I hope you have new tricks. I'm a fast learner." The cockiness is just asking for comeuppance, so he might as well make the most of it, "And I've got you right where I want you."

Tom flexes against the hold. He doesn't manage to move Harry an inch. Realisation sets in with a wave of gooseflesh, then Tom goes boneless. Harry doesn't let up, looking for the trick, but Tom's mind isn't offering clues, it's just static – unless *that* is a clue. One way to find out.

Tom doesn't resist when Harry slides their arms further above his head until he can grip both in one hand. As Harry's weight settles, chest to chest, Tom's mind *shivers*, setting Harry shuddering in sympathy of the toe-curling feeling echoing down to his bones.

Oh, Harry swallows. That's interesting. Worth exploring later.

He tucks his free arm under Tom's shoulder, pulling him tight so he is panting into Harry's neck. This way, Harry covers him entirely. No one else gets to see him all raw and exposed.

Tom's mind is overflowing with feelings and contradictions. Vulnerable but safe.

You are, Harry promises. *I've got you.*

Harry kisses him then, releasing his wrists to tangle his fingers in silky hair, holding him tight until he regains his equilibrium. Harry knows he's there when Tom starts sneaking in moves to flip them again.

You were saying about Hermione?

It takes Tom several gratifying seconds to reclaim his train of thought. *She is essential. As are Krum, Delacour, Diggory, Bones – anyone who will fight will us. We must strike quickly and decisively.*

We'll need more help. Even if we don't need to breach the defences, it'll still be crawling with aurors inside. If you don't have enough moles for a coup, you don't have enough to fight them.

But I'll have you.

You're joking. Harry's hands clench, digging into waist and shoulder. He'd better be joking. Harry is not leaving his side if they're going into battle.

Not what I meant. You underestimate your influence. You have followers too. And Dumbledore has faith in you – he'll bring the Order of the Phoenix. That force, with my insiders, is enough.

To defeat Grindelwald and all his aurors? Harry doubts it, even if the alliance can roll out the welcome mat. The Order is widely thought to be a myth, and only a small group could keep a secret that well.

To capture the media control room.

Harry inhales sharply, an inkling of where this is going. *We broadcast our strike.*

Ron and Sirius reported that the pranks spilt out from Hogwarts, first to Beauxbatons and then further, just like Dumbledore predicted they would. It was spearheaded by Fred and George and then took on a life of its own as people were emboldened by Umbridge failing to stop the pranks or punish the perpetrators. But that was just people venting their frustration. Chaotic, uncoordinated, ineffective – but what if they were organised?

It's probably not a coincidence, Harry realises, that Tom started spearheading the pranks the same week that he announced the switch to Plan B.

Because if you show violence to an already angry and emboldened mob, it will set off a chain reaction. Riots.

Yes, yes exactly, Harry, you see it!

Except it won't set off just any mob, but *every* mob. Mandated viewing means it will reach every last person in Europe, all at once.

The aurors can't just batter down the hatches at the Ministry if each Lord is lighting up the floo demanding protection from the hounds at their gates – those Lords keep Grindelwald in power. Either the

Ministry falls, or the entire ruling class. It's defeat in one fell swoop, or death by a thousand cuts.

Merlin. Grindelwald's forces will be utterly overwhelmed. Harry's heart leaps. Each beat adds to the fierce hope kindling in his chest. This is far from the high-risk, high-cost rebellion Harry imagined. It's as sneaky, underhanded, and ruthless as Ron cornering Harry in chess, if Ron was one to arrange the board to put the king in check before he even realised they were playing.

Tom Riddle, you manipulative genius.

Harry rises onto his hands so he can take it all in. The man lying in the dirt like he owns the earth, wearing a cheshire cat grin, and positively basking in Harry's shock and awe. Satisfaction is an appallingly good look on him. It's all the better with his hair a mess from fooling around together, brown locks hiding the most brilliant mind Harry will ever encounter, even if he lives another hundred years.

At that, Tom surges up, licking into Harry's mouth in a way that makes his brain short circuit. His muscles shake and they're singularly useless in resisting Tom rolling them over. The outcome is more than acceptable –delightful, really– but Harry wishes he'd managed it with more style than a landed fish. Ron will rib him for that when he shows up – because he will come. He'll bring the DA. Not because they're following Harry, but because the Ministry has pushed them to the edge. Months of existential dread, only to then be uprooted from their school and forced to watch their classmates hunted for sport. The students will boil over first. Their parents won't be far behind.

Tom bites a sharp rebuke. *The Ministry put the students on the front, but you organised them into lines.*

Harry bites back. Saying he leads the DA is like saying he leads Ron and Hermione. It's absurd. They decide what to do together, and occasionally even agree.

That's why people want to follow you. You value everyone. They can tell. But more than that, Tom drags his teeth over his jaw. *You're creative. Opinionated. Decisive.* He leaves imprints near Harry's ear, chin, throat. *They rely on you to solve the tough problems they can't. That's what a leader* ***is****.* Tom settles on a spot and his tongue comes back into play. At the first taste, he rumbles with deep satisfaction. *And as soon as you cast, it's clear you have the power to achieve what you set out to do.*

Delicious.

It's his pleasure that gets to Harry, hitting like a lance. Heat radiates out from his chest to his toes. Tom snakes a hand up his shirt, traces the flush down his chest. If Harry weren't already on his back, he'd be knocked over by how much Tom wants to tear the shirt off so he can see Harry's body respond to him. But their lines in the sand are possibly the only ones worldwide that he would never cross. He entwines their minds deeper instead, settling beneath Harry's skin.

He can get beneath Tom's. If anything is clear from Hermione's childhood stories, it's that Tom does not share. Not toys, not class notes, and certainly not credit. *What I'm hearing is that I stole your coup.*

Not my coup – our rebellion.

No pushback. He's serious. Harry digs his fingers into Tom's hips.

And doing your half of the work is not stealing.

If Harry can do it. Raise an army. He isn't a big speeches guy. The DA and Order alone won't be enough – those riots are critical. *What's the backup if enough people don't show up?*

Tom laughs. *You couldn't keep enough away if you beat them off with sticks.*

Harry takes a deep breath against the doubt. Tom knows what he's talking about. He rearranged the Ministry by pushing over dominos because he could predict how the pieces would fall.

I do, Tom assures. *You have no idea how far your popularity skyrocketed when you laughed at them overwriting your training score.*

Harry blinks. He could see the duel getting attention, but *that*? He certainly wouldn't have guessed that impressed anyone. Sirius keeps track of how many turns in her grave his mother is racking up, but he hasn't sent a patronus since before the first task; Harry isn't up-to-date.

No matter how they threaten you, you never waver. I could plan for it. I knew I could count on you.

Not reliance – reliability. That sentiment from and for someone who won't be taken away knocks Harry flat. His heart swells. He has the

advantage of two free hands and makes full use of them, pushing happiness into his fingertips. His touch is magic, sparking where it meets Tom's skin.

"Fuck!"

Harry doesn't let up until Tom's arms give way, and even then, he just slides both hands up his shirt, laying fingers along his ribs. The breath stutters out of him in a wheeze.

Tom is left panting into Harry's shoulder, "Now who's cheating."

Harry kisses his cheek. *You can count on me until the end.* The next step of the plan is obvious – once the lackies are out the way, it'll just be them and Grindelwald. He'll need someone watching his back. *I'll fight by your side.*

Fully? Tom climbs back to his elbows, which Harry's lungs appreciate. *People are going to die,* he warns.

I know. He's signing up for a war, no matter how brief. But not wholesale execution of the opposition after they win.

No, Tom agrees. *Ideally, we'd arrest rather than kill his acolytes, that'd make the transition of power smoother. It'll be messier than my original plan, but it's a manageable hassle. Either way, we ruin a lot of people's lives. Are you conflicted about that?*

If Harry must choose between his friends or his enemies, the champions or the people who forced them into the arena, can he do it? Can he trade his life for dozens of theirs?

No, I'm not conflicted, Harry admits. It's not a truth he particularly likes about himself. But since the Games started, the Ministry has had one message they've been trying to teach him since the beginning: sacrifices must be made.

Well, he's learnt.

People like Umbridge profit from a tournament that forces children to fight to the death. If you climb to the top over the precarious mound of corpses, you risk the fall.

This needs to stop. Enough is enough, Harry says. He feels Tom's lips stretch into a wicked grin against the sensitive skin behind his ear. *Let's burn it to the ground.*

A sharp sting of teeth.

Harry hisses.

“Sorry,” Tom says, sounding more like he didn’t intend to do it than he regrets that he did. *Your ruthlessness is… distracting.*

That does it for you?

You have no idea, Tom says, soothing over the bite.

Harry might have some idea. He tilts his head, and this time Tom can’t resist what’s on offer. He nips Harry’s lips until they open, then sucks on his tongue. It sets fire to every nerve in his body. Harry groans and knows his dignity is a lost cause.

Mercy, Riddle, or I won’t be able to understand multisyllable words. Or most single syllable ones besides ‘yes’, ‘Tom’, ‘more’, ‘please’ and assorted profanity.

Tom grins and relents, easing into soft pecks.

Harry scrambles to recapture his train of thought. Revolution, open battle, it’s risky. There won’t just be casualties on the enemy side. Maybe he’ll lose the alliance he’s trying to save, or students in the DA who haven’t had the benefits of Moody’s bootcamp, Merlin, some of them are so young – and that’s only if they win. *If we fail, we’ll be executed and doom our friends and family to Azkaban or worse.*

Even if we ultimately succeed, but too slowly. Amos Diggory is within arm’s reach of Grindelwald some days.

But if they stay the course, most of the alliance will die in the arena. It isn’t a choice, not for Harry, but it’s not a call he can make on anyone’s behalf.

Harry’s movements slow under the weight of his thoughts.

Tom is conspicuously silent. He adjusts to the new leisurely pace, enjoying it without trying to be distracting. They end up laying on their sides, entwined, exchanging simple kisses and Harry’s not entirely sure when or how that happened.

Harry cracks his eyes open a lazy sliver. Tom’s look almost gold in this light.

We have to offer my friends an out.

With conditions, Tom warns. *If they squeal, we're dead.*

You'd tell them the plan? Harry is astonished.

As much as they need to know.

Exactly. He'd half expected Tom to manoeuvre Hermione into a seemingly theoretical debate to wrack her brains.

Hermione won't be a problem, she's even more of a dissident than you are. But the others all have family entrenched in government. They know what the Ministry does with anyone remotely connected to someone charged with treason. They know the Ministry won't wait for charges to be laid to start looking for hostages.

Harry's heart sinks. *You think they won't rebel with us.*

Not without assurance that we'll succeed.

We can't promise that.

We can stack the deck heavily enough in our favour to guarantee it, Harry, I'm betting my life on it.

*Then if you explained the **whole** plan to them…*

It wouldn't be enough. Tom is certain. *I'm an untested newcomer. Not like you. They'll believe in you.*

But I'm just Harry.

'Just Harry' just cast an impossible patronus. Just led them through a week of imperius and inferi laden hell. Just ran rings around Umbridge's attempts at control. Riddle hums a low purr than makes Harry shiver. *It will take very little to push that belief into faith. A touch of destiny. A prophecy.*

Harry draws in a sharp breath. *You know what it says.*

Dumbledore really never told you? Tom tilts his head. He strokes a hot line up Harry's jaw, disguising a bracing grip. *I will. Clear your mind.*

Harry holds his gaze though barely slitted eyelids. Considering that it has taken concerted effort to think of anything aside from lips-hands-tongue, clearing his mind is much easier than usual.

Pressure builds in Harry's head. It gets heavier, but not sharp, nothing

he can't bear. A picture forms in Harry's imagination; a memory of Hogwarts, and it's difficult for Harry to remember that it's not his.

The Great Hall is decorated for Christmas, a detail that he finds tacky and unnecessary, not the least because it is now New Year's Eve. It's dinner time. There aren't many people. The headmaster and this year's rotation of the skeleton crew of staff sit among the students. Professor Snape is only just arriving, showing up as late as he can professionally countenance, of course. He'll leave early by the same principles.

There are two dozen students, mostly muggleborns, all tedious conversationalists. Hermione was invited to stay with her friends. Without her, or any Slytherins, there's no one worth talking to, so he heads toward the end of the table where there is a first year who will hopefully be easily intimidated to silence.

The little girl goes unnaturally stiff and croaks out, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches… Born of mixed blood, born for others to raise… and the Dark Lord will meet them in games, but they will have power the Dark Lord knows not… and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can thrive while the other survives…"

He decides to sit beside Denny Little instead.

If anyone doubts it's a real prophecy, the aurors set the record straight when they storm through the gates before the silence fully settles.

The teachers try to stand between Grindelwald's most trusted and the students, which only means they're the first to be dragged off for questioning.

The professors should fight, why aren't they fighting?

No one stops them pulling the students away next. He is shoved into the antechamber ringed with armed, angry, adult wizards. He doesn't know what they want, what he can say to make them leave him alone. They're asking stupid questions with no right answers. They're powerful – they can do what they want to him, and no one will try to stop them except Tom himself. He's good with spells, but he's just a third year. He's terrified. He hates them.

The seer is hysterical. She doesn't remember giving the prophecy and digging it out of her subconscious for more details will destroy her mind. The aurors see less of a problem with the act itself than the fuss Dumbledore is willing to make of it. They want to take her to the

Ministry, and he knows she wouldn't emerge from there again.

Dumbledore talks them down. Seers are a conduit, not an informant, not seditious. Dumbledore reassures them that the Chosen One probably hasn't even been born.

The aurors collect Dumbledore's silvery memory in a prophecy orb and then see about removing every other copy of the information. They know obliviation won't work on the headmaster. Dumbledore promises to never seek the prophecy orb, but the aurors take no chances and extract an Unbreakable Vow, because they're idiots. Tom can think of several loopholes on the spot. Snape will have it to him by the end of the day.

The rest, they obliviate. They don't know Snape is a master occlumens. They don't suspect a fourteen-year-old could be, either.

The students and staff are forced into a line, forced to walk willingly to an enemy wand, to recognise their fate clearly in the growing pool of vacant-eyed students.

He is angrier with every spell. Memory charms risk permanent brain damage. He prizes his brain, second only to his magic. It's who he is. He won't let them steal even the smallest part. He gathers everything that's his and buries it deep down until there is nothing on the surface but the blank slate they're expecting.

"*Obliviate!*" The spell crashes like a wave over his shields. He imitates the hollow face of the students before him. "You enjoyed the feast tonight, but it was otherwise forgettable. Nothing noteworthy occurred."

He takes special care to memorise their faces and he starts to plan. They'll pay for what they tried to do to him. Scandal is too good for them.

Two years later, they're permanent residents of St Mungo's.

Another two years after that, and Tom is inches away, brushing his thumb over Harry's cheek.

Harry blinks. When Tom sees Harry's eyes focus, he loosens his grip. Harry leans against his shoulder and just breathes. The ground doesn't feel entirely stable.

Tom curls over him, whispers into his hair, "You back with me?"

“Yeah,” Harry exhales against Tom’s neck. Tom shivers and his skin pebbles.

It was Tom’s third, so Harry’s second year. He would’ve been throwing wrapping paper around with Sirius and Hermione, planning to visit the Weasleys in the morning. He couldn’t have known at the time it would be the last holiday he’d spend with his godfather.

Now you see, a halfblood orphan can defeat the Dark Lord Grindelwald, Tom says.

That’s not exactly specific. It might not be me. Harry thinks he’s already being generous allowing that it might.

We don’t need to be correct. It’s already useful if people believe it. And not just our side.

Ahuh. As if that isn’t exactly what has Harry’s brain floating in scepticism.

Tom lightly thuds their foreheads together, just shy of an admonishment. *Don’t be obtuse. You’re not ‘just Harry’ to anyone. You’ll see. Your friends will reach the obvious conclusion without any persuasion.*

Hermione will pick it to little logical pieces, Harry insists. She’s smarter than he is. Besides; *You’re not convinced I’m the chosen one, either.*

You could be. It’s as likely as any other option. Tom shrugs, but there’s a twist in the tide that suggests he is not as blasé as he seems.

What’s wrong?

I need your upmost discretion, Harry. No one can know.

Harry sooths a hand down his back. *Of course.*

Tom shudders beneath his palm. The tide swirls in a way it hasn’t before, rocking back and forth in a manner sure to make Harry seasick. It’s so incongruous it takes Harry a moment to realise that Tom is nervous. His eyes flick over Harry’s face, not in a dramatic pause, for once, but in hesitation.

I didn’t learn parseltongue. I was born with it.

What? But that’s– impossible. It’s a bloodline ability, but Tom was born in the muggle world. The world into which squibs are tossed away. Realisation hits Harry with the subtlety of a blow to the head –

you're a halfblood.

A halfblood raised in an orphanage with a secret power. Whose chosen career path is to lead a revolution. Who shows the kind of persistence that could easily be mistaken for fate. Who had the prophecy delivered at his feet.

It's you.

Tom's mind mingles agreement and disagreement. *It could be either of us. Or neither. We can play the prophecy however we choose. But yes, I want to use it.*

Which must be why he kept his heritage a secret instead of leveraging it for considerable influence. The prophecy can't apply to Tom if Grindelwald learns of his ability. Never mind that it could open all those doors slammed in his face for being presumed muggleborn. Even noble purebloods might be willing to overlook his impurities for such a rare power, for what it says about his bloodline. Bellatrix's fawning makes even more sense now – and so does her silence. She is under a geas. Harry can see the signs now; she can't say a word about it. Maybe more of the Slytherins as well. Tom has the entire house in an iron grip without sending weekly visitors to Madam Pomfrey. He got them to stop bullying him way back in his first year. If he swore the house in back then, he could have an entire generation of the most ambitious recent graduates filtered through society by now. Which would fit his claims of Ministry insiders nicely.

Grindelwald won't know what hit him. He doesn't even know Tom is an option.

You want to use me as bait, Harry realises.

Tom freezes. *Bait is such a strong word. Perhaps, distraction –*

Fuck off, if the best I can be is bait, I'll be the best damn bait I can be.

Agreeing doesn't get you out of the running for being the Chosen One.

Damn.

Tom reaches the end of his restraint. He pulls Harry into a collision course with his grin.

Harry grins back and their teeth clack. *What's the vow?*

They are sworn to never reveal it or use the knowledge against me.

I have to say it aloud, right? You should've set those fancy wards. Not that covert snogging isn't fun–

Your word is enough for me, Tom whispers, soul to soul.

Harry freezes. It's far more than what Tom has trusted him with before – than what he's trusted *anyone* with, if Harry is reading it right. He swallows, but that doesn't stop the lump crawling up his throat. How could it, with the full force of the heat expanding in his chest behind it? He buries his face in Tom's shoulder and squeezes. Tom grabs him like a lifeline, tight enough to make his ribs creak, which feels like just enough pressure to keep Harry together.

They hold on until muscles start to tremble and the forest is darkening in the late afternoon light. The tree house is still and quiet.

We should get back up there.

Tom rubs the tense muscles in Harry's neck. *Relax. The gamemakers won't send anything after us tonight.*

How do you figure?

I told Bella I would seduce my way into your camp and release the basilisk. They'll give me a chance to find a workaround for my vow. The longer we can find plausible delays, the longer the peace will last.

The gamemakers want you dead too. The last time we were alone they tried to kill us both.

Opportunistic. They want you dead far more than me.

Bloody prophecy, Harry grumbles, even as a thrill goes through him. Tom's right: they can use this.

They played an ace and it failed. But nothing they've sent into this arena yet has proven deadlier than me. They'll give me a chance. Tom rests his forehead against Harry's. *We should rest while we can. It won't be long before they believe I'm secretly planning to keep you after the finale, and then they'll try to find something to top the dementors.*

Rest and plan, Harry says with a cheeky grin.

In the interest of efficiency, Tom agrees solemnly.

Chapter End Notes

Fates: And thus we decree a prophecy! With all due gravitas and – exCUSe me.

Fates: No, Tom, drop him, no – ugh! I'll let you evil monologue. Don't you like the sound of an evil monologue? Wait – Harry, do not poke him there, he just started to concentrate. Yes, I know you think it's funny, but could you just – he'll still be there in FIVE MINUTES jesus.

Fates: Now look at what you've done. We had more plot points to cover today, but god forbid either of you get some important, difficult work done, you'd find that far too attractive. Now the schedule is– TOM! I WILL GET THE SPRAY BOTTLE DO NOT TEST ME!

Merry fucking Christmas and happy New Year. Last year you got legilimency with a side of breath-play, this year you get… huh. Wild coincidence, but I guess that's fate too, because my smart arse gave them both a competence kink and thought that'd be the end of it, but competence kink naturally means semi-lethal sparring is their foreplay and criminal conspiracy is their dirty talk, so do you think I had any say in whether they're into more kinky shit at this point? Nooo.

Side note: I don't write much (any) romance usually. Let me know what's working and what isn't.

Mountains and molehills

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Of the possible reactions to Harry and Tom's return, Harry would've preferred obnoxious cat-calling to the sideways looks as the others pretend they don't know what they think they know.

"Er, Harry, you've got a…" Hermione gestures helplessly at her own neck.

Harry reflexively prods a tender spot. A corner of his mind purrs darkly and he's not sure if it's him or Tom.

Hermione flushes. "Yeah, that side too."

Well, that's embarrassing. Not as embarrassing as she thinks, though. He did not moon the entirety of Europe.

"We weren't any worse than Ron and Lavender in the common room," he assures her. Reconsiders. "Not *much* worse." Probably. Harry intends to remain happily oblivious to anything Ron got up to after curfew.

It's enough for the flushes to die down, but the alliance can still hardly look at them. Which is just as well, because there are plenty of eyes to catch Cedric when he makes a run for it. Krum fires off a stunner and Hermione refreshes the animagus-reversal spell as Cedric skids to a stop.

"We should move that rug," Krum muses. "Carpet burn on his face cannot be comfortable."

"Better than cleaning up blood if he splits his head open," Hermione shrugs.

"Oh, so that's why you've stuck the furniture to the ceiling," Harry realises. "But you didn't just lock him in containment wards?"

"We tried that. He somehow got a skillet in there," Fleur says grimly. "I nearly couldn't lower them in time."

"Merlin." Chills race down his spine. "Tom?" He can't get rid of this

twisted spell soon enough.

“On it,” Tom steps around him, a quick flick replacing the stunner with ropes, another bringing Cedric back to consciousness. Then he casts a spell he absolutely doesn’t need. “*Legilimens*.”

That’s Harry’s cue. “Let him concentrate, guys. Sit down and stay quiet.” Because it’ll make his own job much easier. It’s convenient that he needs to summon the armchairs and lounge back to the floor – he can easily hide the extra flourish necessary to cast an illusion. It *should* look like they’re just waiting around for Tom to do his thing, but Harry isn’t an expert, and it’s hard to tell if he’s masked their real actions entirely. Harry quickly crosses the room to wave a hand in front of Krum’s face. The girls look at him like he’s mental, but Krum is the only one without occlumency, and when he doesn’t react, Harry grins. “That should be enough to fool the omnioculars for now. Fleur, I need you to bury the back room in the strongest privacy wards you’ve got. We have a lot to discuss.”

“Secrets?” Amelia leans forward, eyes sparkling.

“So secret that the Ministry can’t even suspect we’re talking about secrets,” Harry confirms. “We’ll move over there when Tom is done, but we need to make it look like nothing has changed in here. Can you take over, Hermione? I’m not sure I can concentrate that long.”

Fleur nods sharply. “Oui.”

Hermione wavers on the edge of immediate gratification. “Fine, but I *will* have answers eventually.”

“Thanks, now stand back in case he starts swinging,” Harry says, and touches Krum’s arm, startling him out of the illusion. He very nearly clips Harry’s ear.

Tom finishes not long after Fleur does. The first sign is Cedric’s strained grimace, then he slumps in his bonds with a muttered swear. It’s less muffled when Riddle vanishes the ropes and Cedric almost lands on his face again.

Harry squeezes Tom’s shoulder as he stretches his tense neck side to side, and takes the opportunity to kiss his temple. The frown lines vanish.

Harry lingers a moment more before hurrying over to Cedric. “How are you?”

“My head is killing me,” he winces. On the second attempt, he manages to keep his eyes open long enough to say, “Harry – I’m *so* sorry.”

“Wasn’t your choice, wasn’t your fault.”

“The things I tried to do to you… Merlin, I would’ve happily watched her torture you, I –”

Harry cuts him off with a firm squeeze of his forearms. “We’re fine.”

“Not all of us.” Cedric’s eyes don’t quite focus. “I pushed Roger off the edge. It’s because of me he got it in his head to appease Bellatrix.”

“Roger made his choice. No one else,” Krum says. His eyes keep darting to their body-doubles sitting quietly on the lounge, but Hermione is keeping him grounded with her grip on his arm. Neither are masking their concern particularly well.

“I killed him, I –”

“No. I did,” Tom says.

Cedric just blinks for a long minute. “Is reminding me supposed to make me feel better or make me angry at you instead of myself?”

Before Tom can do more than scowl, Amelia slides between them and thrusts her hands forward. “Hot chocolate,” she demands, and opens the lunchbox.

Cedric stares at it.

“You always snuck us mugs from the kitchens when one of us was sick or sad. It helped a lot. We never told you how much we appreciated it.”

“It’s what my mum does for me.” His fingers curl around the mug by reflex. He takes a sip. “Thank you. You too, Riddle, I owe you one.”

“Mhmm.” Tom taps Harry’s wrist, the message clear: time is ticking.

The last thing Harry wants to do is dump more information on Cedric, but they won’t get away with the illusion forever. Hopefully a distraction will help him. “Can you make it to the back room?”

Cedric manages to stand. “Yeah.”

Tom pauses over the threshold to poke it with a detection spell. The ward lattice looks more like lace. Tom's eyebrows rise, which speaks volumes more than his quietly murmured, "Impressive."

"Nerd out later," Harry reminds him, snagging his hand on the way past. He conjures a squishy circular lounge.

"Right," Tom says, disappointed, and doubly so with the furnishings. He may be put out that he can't lord over the head of a stately conference table, but he doesn't seem to lack majesty when he steeples his fingers, regardless of the knitted throw blanket backdrop. "I can now tell you the real reason I'm here."

Krum tenses with his hand halfway to the lunchbox.

"Four years ago, I witnessed Trelawney deliver a prophecy. Moments later, aurors descended on the school to wipe every trace of it. At least in those minds that were not protected by occlumency. There are three people who recall that day – the Headmaster, Professor Snape, and me."

Hermione gasps. "They should never! Memory charms can have terrible side effects on developing minds."

"Grindelwald would consider any measure justified, in this case." Tom lets the moment linger. "The prophecy predicts his downfall."

Possible downfall. It doesn't even predict which side will win, Harry points out beneath a chorus of gasps.

Don't discourage them.

He won't, but Harry has a hard time imagining his friends will find it very encouraging in the first place. There are many interpretations, and he won't insist that only the worst ones exist, but those are the contingencies they'd better prepare for.

Plan to succeed, Tom insists, *not only to not fail.*

"What." Krum straightens with deadly intent.

Tom smirks. "Hard to imagine, isn't it? For decades, Grindelwald has cultivated a reputation for being unbeatable."

"He's never lost a duel," Amelia says.

"Or if he has, his opponent hasn't lived long enough to brag about it,"

Hermione scowls.

“That alone deters many challenges. He appears unbeatable, so people do not even try,” Tom says. “You can imagine how damaging a mere rumour of fallibility could be, let alone the actual prophecy, with a cast list, instructions and itinerary.”

Hermione turns wide eyes on Harry. “Do you think – when Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape told you…”

Cedric nearly coughs hot chocolate over his lap. “Wait, Riddle isn’t trying to pull one over us?”

Eh, debatable.

“Which class of prophecy is it?” Fleur plants her hands. Her next move might be to lunge for the throat if his answer isn’t expedited.

“Chosen One,” Tom says.

From the way a steel rod suddenly seems welded to her spine, Harry assumes than means it is Serious Business.

“Dites-moi,” she demands.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born of mixed blood, born for others to raise, and the Dark Lord will meet them in games, but they will have power the Dark Lord knows not, and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can thrive while the other survives.”

At once, all eyes fall on Harry.

Oh, come on.

I told you so.

“A halfblood orphan can defeat Lord Grindelwald.” Fleur’s face looks all the more angelic with hope.

“Not necessarily,” Hermione says.

Aha! Good on her. She’d never miss a chance to pick on divination.

“‘Mixed blood’ could refer to muggle lineage, or part-humans, or for Merlin’s sake, even AB blood type. And ‘*born* of mixed blood’ – is it describing the chosen one or their mother as mixed?” But her heart

isn't in it. Harry's smugness is short-lived. "Ron's statistics, the exam scores, the so-called random draw of the first task, it all makes sense now – the Ministry are covering all bases, turning the odds against all halfbloods."

"Is that why Umbridge hates me so much? I thought she was just a bigot," Fleur says.

"Two things can be true," Hermione mutters darkly.

"But I was raised by my parents," Fleur turns a sympathetic look on Harry. "The orphans had it worse."

Well, I did do a lot more to earn it.

Nothing that Umbridge had any evidence of. The tide twists with amusement. *You're grouching.*

It doesn't even fit me well! My parents raised me for most of my childhood!

Your friends don't care. To them, you are exceptional, it makes sense for the universe to acknowledge it, Tom says. *I didn't even have to lead them by the nose.* Which he then proceeds to do in spectacular fashion, presumably just because he can. "Harry was orphaned for the second time immediately after the prophecy was delivered."

He kicks Tom's shin. *You were literally approaching Trelawney! On your birthday! If anyone knew you're a halfblood, they'd see it fits you far better.*

Not necessarily. Divination is just as often figurative as it is literal.

And 'born for others to raise' could mean anything! Harry is not grouching, thank you. He is grumbling. *It doesn't even need to be an orphan. It'd fit someone like Neville better, or anyone raised by a relative or stepparent. Especially if the mother died in childbirth or there was a mix up in the maternity ward.*

The conditions are so vague, Harry knows a dozen people off hand who fit the criteria better than he does, maybe even Dumbledore or Snape. Maybe they're not a perfect fit, but Dumbledore and Grindelwald have history. Prophecies thrive on that kind of poetic justice. Harry could debate the minutiae with Tom all night, but a wretched keen nearly startles him out of his seat.

Amelia bursts into tears. "Weeks of detentions – lines with a blood

quill – then a quintaped – just because Lizzy *might've* been the Chosen One?"

Too late, Harry remembers Görder was an orphan as well.

Grindelwald told Umbridge and the gamemakers to target a twelve-year-old. She was the first one Umbridge tortured. Because she does seem to fit the criteria better than Harry or Fleur. They set her solo against a creature so dangerous wizards made their native island unplottable, on the off chance she could've inconvenienced a power tripping dictator clinging onto his throne against the inevitable march of time.

Harry takes a deep breath. It doesn't help. In the furious silence, there are no distractions for his mind to latch onto. His thoughts can only spin round and round, carving the wrath somewhere deep and cold.

All this torment for nothing more than a paranoid man's security blanket. The prophecy might not even be about Grindelwald – he isn't the only Dark Lord in the world.

"You're going to set the table on fire if you're not careful," Tom says. He's not joking; the wood is smoking under his glare.

"I'll kill him. If I'm Chosen." For the first time, Harry wishes he is the one.

Tom squeezes his knee. His mind splays out over Harry's like a murderous cat basking in deadly solar radiation.

Cedric frowns. "We'll never bait Grindelwald into the arena with the prophecy hanging over his head. He even skived off the Yule Ball."

"We're taking the fight to him," Harry says.

"Does that count?"

"The Games don't end until we bleed into that goblet. Tom has a plan."

"We'll tell you, but before you leave this room, I'll have your vow that you will make no attempt to warn the Ministry," Tom says. Harry raises an eyebrow. Tom rolls his eyes with a sigh. "Or you can choose to walk away now. I'll alter your memories. If you distance yourselves and hold no incriminating information, your families won't be collateral."

“Alter – with legilimency? Is that any safer than obliviation?” Hermione is appalled.

“Safer than being caught privy to a conspiracy. You *will* be interrogated if we fail.”

Now she’s just offended. “Don’t assume that I’m not participating.”

“Don’t assume I don’t know better than to assume,” he snips back, apparently more out of habit than ire, as he is entirely calm when he turns to face the others. “If you help us overthrow Grindelwald, I will ensure you survive the arena and that your families will not be targeted in the aftermath.”

Hermione turns fiery eyes on Krum. He squeezes her hand. “Grindelwald savaged my country. I would do almost anything if I can help stop him.”

“He is a tyrant,” Fleur hisses, looking far less angelic now. “He split my community, pushed the veela out into reserves so they cannot mix with ‘civilised’ folk.”

“He isolated the werewolves too,” Harry frowns. It’s not a coincidence that Umbridge’s politics gained traction so quickly four years ago. Instead of celebrating the New Year, suddenly the papers were full of werewolves sneaking into bathrooms, running in gangs to sniff out innocent witches or seduce vulnerable wizards. An easy target for a smear campaign. Before the month was out, every werewolf was as bad as Greyback, and to appease the public outrage that they manufactured, the Ministry gracefully agreed to broaden the criminal standards for deliberately or negligently spreading the curse to include reproduction. Even though the curse has never been inherited. *Just in case*, everyone said, or *just as well*, because only deviants would choose to be in a relationship with someone who is practically an animal.

Remus lost his girlfriend, his job and his apartment. He couldn’t adopt Harry. Hell, he could barely find a place to live – certainly not in a residential area where he might meet a woman who sees through the propaganda. A hundred pressure points, prodding them back and forth, all aimed at control. There’s no official policy saying werewolves are to be purebred or neutered, but that’s the result – the *deliberate, calculated* result.

Just to avoid mixed blood.

Harry's nails dig into the couch. If it weren't for the transfiguration holding its shape, he'd have split a seam. "Merlin, what else will we find if we keep digging."

"I'll swear your vow," Amelia says. She stands tall. "They killed Lizzy. She deserves justice." For a moment, Harry can see her in the plum robes of the head of the DMLE.

"Are you sure?" Cedric twists his fingers. "It's a big step, not a decision to make angry."

"It's exactly the kind of decision to make angry. I'm not going to sit back until I find a way to stomach her murder like everything else – like every*one* else – I'm *sick* of it!"

Krum eyes Cedric. "It sounds like you are the one who isn't sure."

"I *want* to help." It comes out ragged. "But how can I upend the lives of my whole family with my choices? Merlin, I wish he would just die."

"He's only one hundred and sixteen."

Cedric groans.

Tom tilts his head. "Conflicting loyalties. I must confess I don't understand Hufflepuff devotion for the sake of it. Surely it only counts if it goes both ways, or it is not loyalty, but obedience." He taps his fingers, one after another. "Is it a choice your family would make if it were reversed? Would your father give up his career for your future?"

"He would," Cedric takes a breath. Steadier, he says, "I know you don't think much of my father, but he would."

"He did strike me as more of a difficult man than a bad one."

Cedric looks at Amelia, Krum, and finally, Harry.

Harry won't be the one to break eye contact first, but Merlin, he wishes he knew what Cedric was seeing. Or any of them, looking at him, not questioning that fate should choose him. He wishes they would doubt, at least a little. Faith is for children to deserving parents, before you get to know them as people. Harry is not sure that faith is something you can have in a person. A human makes mistakes. They don't trust their brother and don't even have time for goodbye before they have to run from Azkaban. They trust a friend who turns out to

be a rat. They can be reliable in every way, loyal and strong and smart, and still get ambushed by one too many assassins. One mistake, then promises to always be there are suddenly null and void. But Harry would rather be a person than an infallible god, because who ever heard of a god with friends instead of followers?

They'd better get rid of Grindelwald soon so Harry can clear this mess up.

Cedric sucks in a breath, grimacing as the air hisses past his teeth. He holds it long enough to turn even paler.

"I'm in," he says as the dam bursts.

Now that Cedric has returned the air to the room, Harry can breathe again. He looks at Tom expectantly.

You tell them. You're their leader.

I follow you, so by proxy so do they.

Tom's eyebrow cocks in amusement. *No, you don't.*

Yeah, Harry didn't think that'd slide. Fine. But that means he's leading his way.

"Here's Tom's plan. We'll activate our portkeys with the heart attack curse to sneak into the Ministry. From there, we'll bust open the doors for the Order of the Phoenix and the DA, and with help from Tom's moles, we'll capture the media control room. We use that soapbox to inspire riots which will occupy the aurors and threaten the House of Lords, and force Grindelwald to confront us, ta-da! We win."

Tom turns slowly. "You," he says severely, "have no sense of gravitas."

"You mean theatrics. Yeah, I think that elective was a Slytherin exclusive."

"*Excuse* you. Remind me who vanished for a week, leaving the castle in uproar, only to show up for the exam to troll his way through it so badly that he made three judges cry?"

"Really? Wait – only three?"

"Crouch took a calming draught before they let Bones in."

"Ah, I don't suppose that counts."

“And *I* don’t suppose that you could put at *least* that much effort into this presentation, considering the scope of what we are proposing? You could make it sound a *little* more complicated than baking a cake, or, you know, me becoming sole victor, as another non-specific example.”

“You’re grouching,” Harry says beatifically.

“I am going to bite you.”

“Promises, promises.” Harry throws his legs across Tom’s lap.

Amelia looks at Harry like she has just realised he’s got a death wish. Oh well, the shine had to wash off at some point. Better it happen before that chosen one nonsense really sets in and she can only end up more disappointed when he doesn’t live up to it.

Tom doesn’t bite him, yet. His fingers merely slip beneath the trouser hem to play with the more interesting texture of his socks, and when that fails to hold his attention, he traces Harry’s ankle tendons.

“I like the plan,” Krum says. “Short. Simple. Fewer plays to go wrong.”

“It’s fucking brilliant,” Harry insists. Tom eyes him. He shrugs. “Dressing it up or down isn’t going to change that.”

“Philistines. I’m surrounded by utter philistines.” Tom shares a commiserating look with Fleur, while idly tracing the eyelets around Harry’s shoelaces. Harry must remember to check later that he hasn’t tied them together. “It’s just as well that I didn’t have time to tell you all the details.”

“You were gone for hours. Harry summarised the key points in seconds.” Hermione raises the eyebrow of judgement.

“We were busy,” Tom sniffs. He pinches Harry’s shin.

“Hey! If you’d explained it quickly, I wouldn’t have had time to distract you, so whose fault is it really?”

“Anyway.” Tom shifts. His shoulders draw back, and he seems to take up more space even as he sinks back into the cushions. His fingers tap deliberately now; the movement would call attention if anyone dared look away from his suddenly piercing eyes, but instead the twitch in their periphery serves to keep them on edge.

Everyone unconsciously sits up straighter. Except Harry – Harry just settles in to enjoy his front row seat to the upcoming production.

“You worried that I would draw Ministry attention just by joining you?” Riddle says softly. “Oh, I intend to do so much worse. I’ll get them to do *their* worst. But they’ll be playing right into our hands. It’s a tale as old as time. King Eurystheus threw twelve impossible trials at Hercules trying to kill him. Instead, it made him the most famous hero in history. With every challenge we overcome, we become living proof that even a few ordinary people together can endure the worst that the Ministry has at its disposal – their champions, their monsters, their rigged rules. We defy their order at every unfair turn. We reveal that their menace is an illusion.”

Tom’s smirk is a work of art, as carefully crafted as any sculpture Michelangelo got his hands on. It’s making Harry’s stomach do some very complex acrobatics.

“Because the public outnumber the aurors five hundred to one, and most of them are just like you – they yearn for a better world, and the illusion is the only thing holding them back. It is a social instinct that tells us to put up with it, to blend in with the group, because we know there is only so much each of us can do if we act alone. Everyone waits, chained together, going nowhere unless they can move as one.”

Tom is breathing life into the room. By stringing a few syllables together in the right order and moving *just so*, he is imbuing his words with as much power as any spell. Harry swallows and crosses his legs.

“We step out first so they can follow, and then we *shatter* their chains – we’ll play the prophecy orb on live broadcast from the centre of Grindelwald’s impenetrable fortress. There is no force or magic that can overcome the number of people who will respond.”

The movement of his Adams apple is almost hypnotic. Harry had his mouth on it not long ago. He will again. Merlin, how is he supposed to wait?

That, Harry, is how you deliver a speech.

I am going to bite you, Harry echoes back.

“And that isn’t even the most immediate benefit,” Tom smirks. “By joining forces, we now severely overpower Grindelwald’s favourite champions, and that is not only perfect because we will *win*, no, think of the bigger picture. The Ministry will pour resources into the

Supremacists to try to reassert their advantage, to give Bellatrix a second chance. Anything they throw into the arena is a resource we can steal to topple their house of cards."

Harry quirks a brow in interest. He is not surprised that the plan goes further than he knew. He has yet to encounter a dead end in one of Tom's plots, just an ever-expanding network of back alleys.

"Oh, but we won't be relying on luck of the draw," Tom leans back – lounges, really. It pulls everyone to the edge of their seats. "As we speak, my mentor Barty Crouch is capitulating to his father that he was right, I am a disappointment. He is reassigning my sponsorship behind a worthy champion. Meanwhile, Regulus Black is recommending the best gifts for his dear cousin. She is distraught, I'm sure, from having her toys taken away."

"At you or me?" Harry wonders. She'll either blame Tom for stealing her lunchbox or Harry for seducing him into betrayal. He'd like to know who she's going to fixate on the next time they meet.

"Hard to say." Tom reaches into a pocket and pulls out gleaming goblin silver. "This might tip the scales. She got very attached very quickly. I don't suppose any of you could get some use out of this?"

Tom does not look surprised when no one reveals a hidden skill for throwing knives. "Oh well." He negligently tosses it over his shoulder. There is no sound of impact. "It is frivolous. A trinket to spoil their favourite. Her sponsors have deep pockets and long reach. As do mine, but they've been barred from sending me anything useful."

"Really?"

"The Ministry soured on me after Olivander announced that we have brother wands." *Perhaps Grindelwald now thinks the use of 'they' in the prophecy could be plural.*

Oh, I like that. Harry hums with interest. But if it's plural, then does the last line 'either must die at the hand of the other' apply to the Dark Lord or to Harry and Tom turning wands on each other? If so, then just with a *temporarily* lethal customised curse, right? *Annnnd back to hating it.*

That optimism was short lived.

I can't imagine why anyone would lock you in a basilisk enclosure. Particularly Grindelwald, just after coming to an existential

conclusion.

“No matter,” Tom waves a hand. “The Ministry can play favourites, but they aren’t controlling our resources anymore – *I* am.”

The same instinct that warned Harry he was in for a wild ride just before he faced down an army of hyenas perks up, smelling blood in the water. *Exactly what is on our wishlist?*

Tom mentally cackles like one of his creations, but the only outward sign is the challenge dancing in his eyes, an intense shine he immediately uses to pin the alliance in place. “But before I share anything else, I’ll have your vows.”

I’ll figure it out, Harry says, fully aware that he is being dared into a trap, if not the exact shape and size of it. He’ll figure that out too.

Bet.

They don’t even need stakes to make it interesting. They both win either way. Tom enjoys watching Harry figure things out as much as he enjoys monologuing, and Harry likes tackling a challenge, whether or not he solves it. It only takes a few repetitions of the vows – Hermione, Fleur, Cedric– for Harry to deduce that is precisely why Tom challenged him. Tom is giving his mind something more pleasant than the prophecy to chew over.

You were spiralling a bit, Tom admits shamelessly.

Harry, flush from his partial victory, is more annoyed that knowing about the manipulation doesn’t stop it from working. *The prophecy is worth worrying about,* he insists.

Cool water sooths over his mind. *The specifics aren’t. Don’t lose sleep over it.*

I just don’t want us to corner ourselves relying on one interpretation. But Tom hasn’t insisted on any of his ideas being right or wrong. Harry unclenches his shoulders.

It isn’t a matter of guessing the right interpretation – there isn’t one at this stage. As leading experts in the field are fond of saying, ‘the future is always in motion’. The eventual path depends on the decisions we continue to make.

The great irony of divination is that prophecies are unpredictable, Harry

muses.

Ah, but that is also the beauty of it. The open-ended nature of the future allows wiggle room. We can rig the odds for the paths that favour us.

You want to force a self-fulfilling prophecy, Harry realises. *Sure, why not. That idea has never backfired on anyone, ever.*

All prophecies are self-fulfilling, some are just more ironically so.

Harry wants to argue, because that is an oversimplified statement that seems like it must be wrong on some level, but he can't think of a counterexample right at this instant. Or after a moment mulling it over. He is getting way too deep into the nature of fate and determinism by the time he finds the resolve to focus on more pressing matters and shelve the debate for later.

It's the ironic kind that worries me. If we assume that things will go in our favour, our complacency could ensure that they won't.

Ah, except that is not how we're using the prophecy. It gives us the advantage, not because it necessarily favours us, but because it makes our allies and enemies more predictable. Worry less about what's right than about what everyone believes, because that governs how they will behave, Tom grins, making Amelia stutter in her recitation of the long, airtight vows. *We're playing chess, Harry. We need only predict our opponents' strategy, not every aspect of a nebulous future.*

So we're not strategizing around any one interpretation, but on what we think Grindelwald thinks is the interpretation. How is that not the same thing with extra steps?

You are determined to be difficult. Tom doesn't try to hide his delight. *Perhaps we can agree that people are more predictable than prophecies.*

For now, Harry says. It hasn't escaped his noticed that Tom neatly circumvented any concession on the specific predictive value of prophecies. Harry resolves to bring it up again when it will be most vexing. Perhaps with another debate, because maybe one person is predictable, but a dozen irrational decision makers? A hundred? The web of people making interconnected choices could be what makes prophecies so erratic to begin with, muddling the trail from cause through to effect.

Tom's attention snags on that thought before it is his turn to wrench away from the tangents. *The difference is, they've already played some of*

their cards, tipped their hand.

The halfblood vendetta.

Which is focusing on you more each day. We lean into it, confirm Grindelwald's fears and Dumbledore's hopes, and they'll become more and more predictable.

Harry has to concede that makes a bit of sense. Still. *Be careful. You're assuming we know more than they do. Grindelwald could still have more cards up his sleeves.*

The moment Krum finishes his vow, he narrows keen eyes. "Well, then. What are we waiting for?"

"I'll provoke the Ministry after their next attack, get them to send their best and worst our way," Tom says. "We can take advantage of the peace for now to alter the spell to leave the arena."

"Speaking of – how are we supposed to survive the heart attack curse?" Hermione fails to brush her hair, frizzed up with excitement, behind her ear. "Someone on the inside?"

"See, this is what happens when you don't monologue sufficiently," Tom pokes Harry. Harry snaps his teeth. "You're all familiar with *stamata kardia,* and the counter *restituo*?"

"The spell you used on Davies. That was a test," Krum realises.

"Indeed," Tom says, and they must not look unnerved enough, because he shrugs. "The opportunity presented itself."

Hermione frowns, but having received many himself, Harry can spot the difference between concentration and disapproval. "How long did it take to trigger the portkey?" Why is it, of all Harry's loved ones, the werewolf is the least vicious?

"Less than a second, but we should allow at least that long to ensure it works." Tom catches himself then, or catches someone not keeping up with his leaps of logic. If backtracking frustrates him, he doesn't show it. "I'm trying to chain the curse and counter-curse together so the effects will present in sequence. But it is a nullification-type counter, so without extensive reworking, the combined spells won't reach the end of the incantation, let alone a target, before the magic dispels."

"A time delay problem," Krum muses. "It would not have to be long –

Davies vanished so quickly. Hmm, but it would chew through power so fast, adding more would barely slow it down."

"Unless we could change the reaction to a shallower exponential curve," Hermione says.

"The exponent is in the primary position," Tom says. He turns to Harry, "Essentially, it can out-grow almost any magic it encounters."

Harry takes a leap. "That's what makes it dark?"

"Yes. Not a problem in itself, but there is a large darkness differential between this curse and counter-curse. Combining them gives the curse access to free energy that won't fight to keep its own shape, increasing the reaction speed. Like throwing a match in a tinderbox in an attempt to put it out."

Harry hums. Can't brute force overpower it – so that's how nullification counters are different to smothering counters. It must exploit some kind of loophole after the curse is fully established.

"Tricky," Krum comments.

A snap of Tom's fingers conjures a quill and parchment. He writes an equation. And then he just doesn't stop.

Harry squints. A lot of the Greek alphabet has snuck its way into proceedings.

"Very tricky," Krum amends. "That is… a lot of terms to balance."

"It isn't the only option I've been exploring."

Hermione conjures her own stationary. The gleam in her eye makes Harry lean back in alarm. "What have you tried already?"

Harry loses track of the conversation soon after that. Technical details always have a way of slipping through his mind. Maybe because he is focused on putting pieces in the bigger picture, and there certainly are a lot of pieces all of a sudden.

"I don't know what they're talking about," Amelia confesses quietly.

"I'll tell you a secret – no one does," Harry murmurs back, grinning. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. No one is the best at everything. Riddle is a savant with curses and dark magic, but even he couldn't figure this out by himself. Watch – they're all circling around Fleur

because her warding expertise lends itself to layering complex magics. Hermione is spawning obscure ideas the rest of them haven't heard of from some footnote of an index in a random book she read five years ago. Fleur and Riddle decide how to implement them, but Krum is the best at arithmancy, so he's the one running the numbers to check if their theories are actually viable."

It helps that Tom is a surprisingly good teacher, and he can quickly convey the concepts he learns from one of them to the others.

"Ooh," Amelia's expression clears.

"Don't get bogged down on the details," Harry suggests. Krum is doing something with spatial dimensions that Harry didn't know existed – that way only headaches lie.

"Thanks," Amelia says.

"Do me a favour? Ask Cedric to fill you in."

Too wise eyes dart over and recognise the unfocused look on Cedric's face like no one her age should. She nods seriously.

It takes Harry a moment to get back into the flow of the conversation, distracted by the transformation coming over his friends. All brakes are off. The nerd squad are putting their heads together, revealing their cards in a way a group of more than three simply couldn't before. There's a spark. Not a harsh light that would put their gaunt cheeks and dull hair in stark relief, no, an energy. Even if Harry doesn't understand exactly why Hermione is so excited or Fleur is smiling, he can tell they're making progress. Cedric is sitting straighter, more confident with every passing moment. Amelia helps, tucking herself into his side as she listens, learning with rapt attention – there is barely time between her whispered questions for Cedric's mind to drift to darker memories.

They're coming back to life. It's the confidence of seeing a path forward out of the fog, after meandering around just stalling and surviving.

It's hope.

"The Draught of Living Death is far too risky. We'd need to rely on someone else for the antidote," Tom says.

Once Harry realises that they've veered away from spells entirely for

now, the conversation makes a lot more sense.

“But we could survive in the coma for more than ten minutes, which is the limit for cardiac arrest. I’m just thinking of contingencies. If we can’t get the counter working automatically, it’d be better to go with the potion than the curse.”

“We can get the spell working. How hard could it be?”

“We could at least check inventory,” Hermione goes for the middle ground. “Harry, would you?”

“Sure.”

Tom’s arm, casually resting across his legs, turns into an iron clamp. “Stay. You’ll be useful here.”

Harry can keep up with what’s going on without sitting in on the technical details he doesn’t understand, besides, “Me? What do I know about spell creation?”

“Nothing, I’m sure, Mr it’s-just-mimicry-magic,” he says wrathfully.

Harry sees the intent in Tom’s mind moments before he points a dangerous finger within Harry’s guard, far too close for a regular shield.

Harry is already moving, slapping a hand over his own chest, “*Protego*.”

The stinging jinx dissipates around Harry like he is shedding iridescent skin before anyone else can grasp what’s happening.

Harry ignores their drawn wands. “If you get hexed for startling them, it’ll be your own fault.” If Harry had so much as flinched, they probably would’ve sprung already.

Fleur is the first to process that it’s over, to focus on the shield instead of the threat. “How did you do that?”

Tom shoots her a look. “See what I have to put up with?” he sighs. “Now I need to ask about your ward chains, because the last time this wretch–” Tom glares at him, Harry grins,” –heard of nullification magic, it was those entwined nullification and paralysis wards you managed to work around, and he wondered if we might adapt the technique.”

Fleur frowns. “That… should not be possible.”

“That’s what I said!” Tom plays his fingers along the legs in his lap, channelling sparks of magic to make the shield flare, poking it for new reactions and weaknesses. He tilts his head at Harry when it finally pops. “You should teach us how to cast this.”

“It’s weaker than the regular version.”

“It’s a shield charm you do not have to drop to cast through. A shield you could maintain continuously through a duel, all day and night in case of surprise attacks. You invented invisible backup body armour.”

Harry blinks. “Huh.” He feels rather foolish. “And that’s why they call you the visionary.”

“You are the furthest thing from stupid or blind,” Tom says, tracing the rim of his glasses into his hair. “At lease while you’re wearing these.”

“Alright, I’ll stay,” Harry says, although he still isn’t sure he’ll be much good with curses. Shields are different. He doesn’t know the theory behind those either, but he has mastered enough different shields to guess which threads to tweak. Defensive magic is his forte – offensive magic, not so much.

“Amelia and I will take inventory,” Cedric says.

“Thanks, Ced.”

The conversation takes an increasingly heated and technical turn. As the arguments pick up, all Harry can tell is that they’re baffled, but not frustrated. It seems like they’re making progress, so Harry isn’t sure why he feels like they’re on the back foot. Whenever he thinks about the prophecy, his gut swoops like they’ve all missed a step.

He doesn’t realise his leg has started to restlessly twitch until Tom flicks his knee. *What’s bothering you?*

At last, Harry realises. There is something about the prophecy – something deeper than semantics and interpretations, something more fundamental. *Why is there are prophecy at all? Why does it take a special power to defeat Grindelwald? Why can’t anyone do it?*

No one man can take on an army. No one tries, Tom reminds him.

You would've, soon enough, prophecy or no, Harry points out. *You wouldn't be the only exception.*

Sure, Grindelwald's reputation deters people, and the aurors would stop almost any who do try, but that just leaves the most crazy or skilled opponents, and they're the most dangerous. Even if Grindelwald is the best dueller in the world, he would slip up from time to time. It shouldn't take a miracle.

Would I? If I hadn't heard the prophecy, perhaps I would have settled for another lot in life.

Yeah, maybe in a version of reality where pigs fly instead of horses.

Alright, so I would've tried regardless.

Succeeded, Harry insists. An older Tom with seven more years of experience under his belt would be such a force to reckon with, it hardly bears thinking about.

Maybe, maybe not. I wouldn't have had you. Perhaps it really will take both of us.

Either or both, I still want to know why us? What have we got that other people don't?

Besides a public platform and army? Tom asks dryly.

Harry is unmoved. *Yes. The prophecy doesn't say anything about toppling the regime, it's about the Dark Lord. One man. A mere mortal.* Harry's foot keeps twitching. *He **is** mortal, right?*

He should be.

Not the level of confidence I wanted to hear.

I have no doubt that kind of magic would leave a mark that is difficult to hide. But say, for arguments sake, that he is unkillable. 'Vanquish' could mean many things, Tom says slowly, chewing the idea over. *Unseating him from his throne by overthrowing his regime would certainly count.*

Which would handily explain why only they can pull it off. It's a nice, neat interpretation that Harry isn't worried about. He just hopes it's the right one. *But what if it isn't that kind of vanquishing?*

You think we can't defeat him by duelling.

I think there must be a reason that no one can, and I don't see why any secret powers should make us the exception. Perhaps partly because Harry can't even figure out what his power would be. All his abilities have been thoroughly broadcast to any Dark Lords that care to watch. The only secrets he has left are a map for an entirely irrelevant location and an old invisibility cloak, both of which are locked in a trunk he can't access. Even if Dobby did say their trunks were taken to the Ministry, it hardly seems worth the detour to track down.

Harry supposes that being co-leader of a secret coup is a position of power, and agreeing to be the bright distraction so Tom can work in the shadows would make Tom Harry's secret weapon, but that seems awfully convoluted when the universe could just give Tom the Chosen One credit where it's due. Worse, it doesn't solve the problem, just leaves it for Tom to somehow deal with. It's back to square one.

That is… a concerning possibility, Tom says, as the rest of his formidable attention turns to mull it over. *It would complicate things. If you and I can't go all out, we might need the entire alliance to fight him indirectly. Area-affect magic, ward traps? Hmm.*

The idea of Amelia in the room with Grindelwald when shit hits the fan makes his stomach clench.

Perhaps Snape and Regulus could – but no, we can't rely on them making it. Even if we could, moving them could weaken our position on other fronts. We could be overcomplicating things. Take away the aurors and he's just a very good dueller – together, we're better. Why should he be impossible to fight? Tom frowns. *Are you sure, Harry?*

Harry tilts his head back, staring helplessly into serious eyes. He can't explain it, not in a convincing, logical way. But the longer he stews on it, the more his neck prickles, sure there is *something* there. It's just like the lion in the grass, but at least that time, he narrowed down the position with detection spells, even if he couldn't see it until it moved. Now, he doesn't even have that much confirmation. He has nothing but a bad feeling. He can feel Tom rifling through his head, trying to find any substance to the pieces that Harry is failing to identify, let alone add to the half-assembled picture. It's small consolation that Tom is trying to prove Harry right, rather than wrong, when he is failing.

We'll call it intuition, Tom says, which is as close to admitting defeat as he'll get. Harry's heart sinks, only to swoop up again when he continues. *Unfortunately for us, I trust your intuition.*

Harry blinks. Alright. Not what he expected.

The bulk of the plan will stay the same. We don't need to take the king off the board to win.

Right. Right, we force a checkmate, which has to be –

Public and conclusive. They need to see us defeat him. If we can't achieve death or disarmament, then we ***must*** *force Grindelwald to surrender, or his supporters will rally. We can't leave them any hope. I'm sure we can devise something.* He strokes Harry's back. It'd be soothing if he'd kept his hand over the shirt. *We will strategize, just in case. Tomorrow. Alone.*

Multitasking, Harry agrees, heart rate kicking up.

Efficiently, Riddle winks.

Fleur calls for Tom's attention, then, because she has drawn out a chain ward schema which is only mostly conclusive, and she takes umbrage with him for bringing such a silly idea to her attention when she can't conclusively disprove it. Tom merrily jumps on the Harry-bashing-bandwagon, and they entertain themselves taking the mickey out of him throughout dinner, which cements Tom's place as only the second-best recent addition to the alliance. After all, even Tom Riddle cannot spontaneously generate bruschetta, followed by roast lamb with mint sauce accompanied by butterbeer (and a bit of Hermione's duck and lentil salad when she's distracted by inventing cutting-edge magic). Dessert ends up scattered among loose parchment and quills, while insights are mumbled around pastries and chocolate.

Two promising leads and some backtracking later, and they're peckish again. Fleur asks the lunchbox to provide a charcuterie board, which to Harry sounds like some kind of disease, but actually turns out to be full of cheese, dried meats and olives with an added risk of wrath because it's served on a plank instead of a crumb-containing plate for some reason.

Harry's back aches when he finally stands to clear the mess.

Fleur yawns. "*Tempus*. Goodness, is that the time?"

"Five more minutes. We're close," Hermione says.

"No, we're not." The slightest creese mars Tom's brow. It says a lot. "But we're at a good stopping point. Burn everything."

“What?” Hermione gathers her pages of hard work protectively. “I could re-write it in the code we used as children.”

“Codes can be broken,” Tom gives no quarter. “Memorise what will be useful and we’ll continue tomorrow.” He scans a page of equations, “Hmm, dead end.”

Hermione, flicking through pages and muttering to herself like a madwoman, suddenly pauses. Her eyes widen. “Give me that.”

But Tom is already brushing ash off his hands. “Oops.”

“Alright,” Cedric chuckles nervously, stepping between them. “I’ve been thinking we need to sort out sleeping arrangements.”

“What do you mean?” Krum asks.

“Riddle should sleep in a containment ward.”

“Really? You still doubt me, after all that?”

“After all of what?” Cedric blinks innocently. “You just freed me, who knows why, and then we went straight to bed.”

Harry hums. “He’s got a point,” he tells Tom.

“No containment ward.” His tone brooks no argument. “But I’ll give up my wand for the night.” With that, he places it in Harry’s holster. “There. Disarmed.”

Harry shoots him an amused look, but let’s the little fib slide.

“Hermione, do we still appear to be on the couch?” Tom says, already striding from the room.

“Yes,” she says, starting to sound distinctly frazzled.

Tom is already pulling out his sleeping bag. “Be a dear and conjure a mattress,” he says, although, even if the holster could stop him, lacking a wand certainly wouldn’t.

Harry obliges anyway. Tom lays down with a content sigh.

“Is that all? We are going to look very gullible,” Fleur says dubiously.

Tom folds his hands behind his head. “I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.” He closes his eyes. Almost absently, he stomps a

foot, sending out a ripple of magic.

“We could–” Harry cuts off with a yelp as the floor buckles. He stumbles forward, but it’s like landing on pudding, and he’s already off balance when a wave hits the back of his legs. He trips onto the mattress, landing on his hands and knees above Tom. Who hasn’t moved except for the sly quirk of his lips, not even to open his eyes.

“Stop being so fucking terrifying,” Harry growls, and kisses the smirk off his face. *Just one*, he tells himself. But then Tom’s lips move against his stubbornly still mouth, and fingers curl into his hair, and Harry is nearly swept away. Wandless magic with his *feet*, for Merlin’s sake – but no, Harry is not going there. *Snape in a tutu, stirring pickled frog eyes into a cauldron filled with tar, which Harry will have to scrub in his next detention*. Even with that mental image, it takes incredible restraint to pull back. More, in fact, than Harry possesses. He only gets far enough to tuck his face into Tom’s shoulder, where Harry does not bite him. Not even a little bit. He wants that on record.

The people pointedly clearing their throats don’t know what they’re on about.

“You’re a tease, starting things we can’t finish,” Harry grumbles as he sinks his weight into Riddle’s vibrating chuckles.

“Tomorrow.” But for all the promise in that one word, Harry can feel Tom’s muscles are relaxing. His grip loses its edge, turning into idle scratching at his scalp, letting Harry’s blood cool. Harry knows he has to act fast before he turns completely liquid, to find some configuration of limbs that won’t be doomed to pins and needles.

“Yes, he is clearly harmless,” Fleur says dryly.

“Mhmm,” Harry closes his eyes. He is comfortable, tired, and Fleur can keep making good points all she likes, but he isn’t going to be awake to listen much longer.

He barely has the presence of mind to toe off his boots. His socks give him a bit more trouble. He tries again, frowning in confusion. He opens his eyes.

Tom is smirking.

“Did you put permanent sticking charms on my socks?”

The smirk widens. “You get cold feet. It’s annoying.”

Harry scowls, but his shoulders start to shake, and then it's too late to stop. He surrenders, falling face down and laughing so hard he can't make a sound.

He'll blame study induced delirium. It's certainly not lingering relief for having Tom back.

"Alright, settle down, I don't want to hold this spell much longer," Hermione says. It takes her almost half an hour to run the illusion through a basic conversation, dinner, and into their sleeping bags. Judging by the deep breathing, most of the alliance is asleep before she's finished.

Harry's eyes ache, his brain is fuzzy, but he doesn't join them. He should be exhausted. He duelled Riddle, and the day did not get less mentally taxing from there. But when he shuts his eyes, he sees boggart-Tom split open and bleeding out, and his heart speeds up. He sees Tom under the dementor, if Harry was too late… Merlin, it was close.

"You awake?" Harry murmurs.

"Mhmm."

Harry slides a hand up Tom's shirt. His chest is dry. Whole. His heart trots steadily along, a bit faster than it should. It isn't because of Harry.

"I've never come so close to death before. I didn't like it," Tom whispers.

"Me neither."

"I hate that the boggart still hurts you. I hate that it used me to do it."

"I keep seeing it. Whenever I finish my tasks for the day, and it's dark."

Tom waves his hand, turning the tent ceiling transparent. Or perhaps it becomes a magic window – there's no tree canopy in the way, just stars for miles. *Light.* "It's never dark everywhere."

Harry manages to take a deep breath. "That's kinda poetic, for you."

"It's a poetic subject."

"Death or darkness?"

Tom jostles him. “Stars. Historically. Most human cultures put their stories in constellations, to remember great heroes and villains,” Tom says. Harry could just listen to him speak for hours. “The centaurs see it differently. The stars and planets come in cycles. History repeats itself. Mars rises and sets and rises again. There will never be a war to end all wars, because there will be war as long as there is a species on this earth intelligent enough to observe that bright dot on the horizon. To centaurs, stars are the past, present and future. They are possibilities. Crossroads.”

Harry scans the sky for familiar constellations. “Tell me one I don’t know.”

“Heard of Serpens?” The answer comes suspiciously quick.

“Vaguely.” Harry takes a moment to find it. He traces the familiar lines of draco, Hercules, and serpens dipping below the horizon, and tries to figure out why each of them reminds him of Riddle. Other than the whole parselmouth thing.

“To the Greeks, snakes were a symbol of rebirth, shedding lives like their skins. From them, the healer Asclepius learn the secret of resurrection. The healer once fatally wounded a snake and witnessed another place a revival herb on it before it passed. He went on to use the same technique on his patients, bringing them back from anything, until the knowledge died with him.” Tom snorts. “I suppose spreading a cure-all was bad for business.”

No wonder Tom had that story on his mind. “Sounds like phoenix tears.” What Harry wouldn’t give for a few of those.

“Except phoenix powers can’t pierce the veil,” Tom says. “There are supposed to be other ways. Ambrosia. Amrita. Fountain of Youth. River Styx. Elixir of Life. Idunn’s apples. Golden apples of the Hesperides. Lots of references to water or apples in general, all over the world. Perhaps holdouts from older religions? There’s no evidence of substance behind the myths, except the Elixir of Life, but Flamel is the only person who has managed to create a stone pure enough to distil it.”

“That we know of,” Harry muses. “I don’t imagine there’s much overlap between people smart enough to make a philosopher’s stone and stupid enough to advertise they’ve got a source of unlimited wealth and youth. Would be a pretty rare occurrence.”

Tom shakes with barely contained laughter. Harry feels it in a grin

pressed into his temple.

“Golden apples – that one was Hercules?”

“Yeah. Retrieved by Atlas while Hercules held up the sky. I always liked that version. It’s quite rare for Greek or Roman heroes to be cunning. Tricksters weren’t considered very heroic. He went around the dragon Ladon instead of through it, then double-crossed Atlas for his trouble,” Tom says. “But he didn’t take an apple for himself. With the dangers he faced, wanting a little life insurance would’ve been understandable.”

“Divine invulnerability didn’t help Achilles.”

“Because they missed a spot.”

“I know you mean his heel, but he was really struck in the heart. He died when Patroclus fell.”

“That is… not an inaccurate interpretation.”

“But at least he didn’t end up a ghost.”

“What’ve you got against ghosts?”

“Part of you lingering forever, that must be the worst way to extend your time.”

“Why?” Tom asks, oddly intent.

For that, Harry decides to treat the answer just as seriously. “To cling so tightly to something you couldn’t achieve in life, and will never fulfill in death, just means you’ll be eternally tormented by it. Anything that tears you apart like that can’t be worth it,” Harry thinks over the ghosts he knows. All their reasons hit the same key notes; they’re all tragic. “It must take a deeply unhappy person. It’s just very sad.”

Tom is silent for a long time. “Would you choose to be immortal, if it were possible?”

“Forever is a long time.”

“The world is vast and ever changing. You’d never run out things to explore.”

“Would run out of friends and family though.”

“Say they were immortal with you.”

“Like we’re all gods or high elves? Or like I’m just pausing the world at this moment, living each moment to the fullest – anyone can do that.” A swift pinch urges him to get on with it. He doesn’t. “Would you?”

Tom hums vaguely. “It must be nice not to lose sleep over it.”

“Therapy is probably more achievable.”

Another pinch to stop stalling, right in the ticklish spot.

“Gah! Okay, seriously then,” Harry thinks about it. “Hercules achieved two kinds of immortally. Godhood, sure, but having your story passed down for thousands of years just because people want to remember what you accomplished in your life – it speaks to how well you spent it. That’s the best kind. That’s the only kind of immortality I’d want.”

Harry watches serpens set as Hercules and draco stand on the horizon, waiting for the dawn. Tom is silent for so long, Harry figures he fell asleep.

Just as Harry’s eyelids are getting heavy, Tom whispers, “Maybe you’re right.”

Despite it all, their dreams are peaceful.

Chapter End Notes

> This Tom Riddle didn’t grow up during the blitz. On a totally unrelated note, hey, no Voldemort. Note to society: do not traumatise kids by carpet bombing their city for months on end. He's still a sneaky little shit, but I suppose that's genetic. Cookie to anyone who can guess what Tom is trying to trick the Ministry into giving Bellatrix.

> **IMPORTANT:** I’m going to make my stories private soon (maybe next chapter), I’m sick of companies scraping free work to train their AIs and making bank off the result. It’ll still be posted here but you’ll need to be logged into an account to read it.

Where there's a will

Chapter Summary

There's a way

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As far as the audience is concerned, the alliance sleeps in until noon the next day, taking advantage of the opportunity to rest now that they no longer need to hunt and forage for food. But behind the illusion, spell development continues at dawn. It is a feat only achieved peacefully after five hours of sleep with tea to tranquilise all volatile tempers. Quite frankly, Harry does not know how they survived this long without it. Add to that, no-longer-evil Cedric employing his mystical power to make people get along, and even a small explosion or two isn't enough to rock the boat.

"Well, the good news is we can now combine the magic. Nice one, Fleur." Harry squints at the scorch mark. The reaction between curse and counter-curse was far too fast to make out any detail, but it certainly seems like something that would get a heart moving again. *Move a little bit over here, and a little bit over there, and oh what's that on the ceiling?*

Tom throws a scrunched ball of parchment at his head. "Proof of concept. Now we know that it's not failing because the spells are incompatible."

"Rather the opposite, it seems," Harry says, and conjures a new table because a reparo is not going to suffice.

Hermione releases the more valuable notes from their protective shielding and levitates them back in place.

Harry peers over her shoulder at what he thinks is a breakthrough. Tangential breakthrough? To him, it seems like they're back at square one, but looks can be deceiving. Which is fortunate, because this looks like something an arithmancer might spew out in their death throes as they're eaten by a hostile ward from one end and a chimera from the other.

He turns his head a bit sideways. It doesn't make any more sense from

that angle.

“You said this one’s too aggressive and the last is too passive – what if you combine both methods?” Cedric asks.

“How so? We can’t simply layer them,” Fleur says.

“Not without compromise, maybe. Pass a quill? If you relax the requirements for the incantation, it might have to be silent, but look – if we do something like this,” Cedric says, and by the time he has finished writing, it is clear that his uncanny ability to mediate disparate ideas can make people *and* theoretical concepts play nice.

“Interesting,” Tom stares intently. “Bones, how is your silent casting?”

“Good for sixth year defence and transfiguration. Charms are a bit mixed.”

“Hmm, might take some practice first.”

Then Tom takes the idea and runs with it. When he focuses on a problem, the world and everyone in it fades into the background until they produce an idea he can bounce off, carrying it to greater heights than anyone else could imagine.

Harry could watch him for hours –there is something deeply satisfying about seeing him so engaged– but if Tom was at all interested in snogging right now, Harry could be persuaded to give that a shot as well. Merlin, that mind. Wrangling hopeless pieces into miracles has no right to be so attractive. Fortunately, Harry’s mental broadcasting doesn’t distract Tom from his vital job. Harry is currently about as relevant to solving the puzzle as a flobberworm, and consequently just as interesting. His daydreams are only distracting himself.

But he can’t really afford that either. Harry drags his eyes away. Watching Tom is an indulgence he doesn’t have time for. What *does* need his attention is their plan for the Ministry. The school holidays will end in only a couple of days, and the DA will return to Beauxbatons. They might be able to get out of the academy to participate in public riots, to go after the Lords with chateaus in France, but international travel is far more of a hurdle. If this spell isn’t finished very soon, he won’t be able to count on DA support at the Ministry. That would just leave the Order. Harry has no idea what sort of force Dumbledore can bring to bear, assuming he chooses to deploy at the Ministry at all.

But even if everyone arrives at the Ministry perfectly on time – what if they can't get the doors open? If they can't capture the media control room, they won't be able to set off riots to draw most aurors away. Even Tom and Harry won't last long under Grindelwald's concentrated forces. Worst case, if the doors do stay closed, they'll still have Tom's insiders, so maybe the alliance could still make it to the media room with sabotage drawing attention elsewhere, but Harry doesn't see how they can hold the room for long, not without substantial setup time. Setup won't be possible when the Ministry will notice the second they disappear from the arena.

The entire plan hinges on rallying public support. They *must* hold that room, or it all falls apart. Anything else they can play by ear, but this? This is worth reinforcing.

What he needs, Harry decides, is a backup. Something he can deploy in a pinch. Targeted measures would be ideal, but the Weasley fireworks proved that widespread chaos can also very effectively keep Ministry lackies running in circles.

Now that he thinks of it – he never did find the other prank stash Fred and George alluded to. It wasn't in any of the seven passages out of the castle. He figured Umbridge found it first, since the tunnels aren't the best kept secret. The blockage along the path to the Shrieking Shack shows the Ministry knows about that one at least.

But why would they need to block it when the castle wards accomplish the same thing only a few miles further along?

The blockage was marked with a purple M, but Harry didn't actually check if it was a Ministry barrier – and perhaps the Ministry didn't check either. That could've been the whole point. Purple is a Ministry colour, but it's also George's favourite, and an M is not so different from a W. It wouldn't be the first time the twins signed their initials on a bunker after sealing off a tunnel. Harry will never forget the absurdly long password. It's worth checking.

But there's something else on the edge of his awareness. It might be too insane to be called an idea. In case it isn't just worth doing, but worth *overdoing*, Harry decides to take inventory of the empty potion vials.

…

Spell development has reached another roadblock when a paper plane flies out of nowhere and almost nails Harry in the eye. He ducks at the

last moment and immobilises it before it can circle around again.

“What are the chances that this time it’s from Bellatrix?” he wonders as he scans for curses.

“Bella cares very little about nonlethal applications of magic,” Tom says with disdain, joining in with the detection spells. “I doubt a delivery spell would ever occur to her.”

It comes back clear, but the contents earn a raised eyebrow. Harry lets out a slow whistle. “Ganz and Penchev want to hit the Supremacists.”

It’s enough to get Hermione to look up from her parchment. “Head on? Have they lost the plot?”

“It says here, they’ve been monitoring the fort and noticed a certain someone didn’t return last night, but the list shows he’s still alive, so this might be the only chance to strike before the Supremacists get one of their strongest fighters back.”

“One of!” Tom scoffs.

“There, there,” Harry squeezes his shoulder. Tom swats him. “When they put it like that, it’s almost not insane.”

“Almost? It’s not half bad, working with what they know,” Cedric says.

“Except they’re only asking for me, Hermione and Fleur to help,” Harry tilts his head. “That’d be a pretty even matchup. It’s too bad we’re nowhere near desperate enough to voluntarily face Bellatrix in a fair fight.” That’s just asking for casualties. No, Harry would want overwhelming numbers and power, and for that, the alliance would be better off alone. Tom more than makes up for Ganz and Penchev. Add in Krum, Cedric and Amelia, and it’s no wonder the Ministry is getting nervous.

Tom frowns. “Unless it’s you Ganz and Penchev are after. Since you’re exchanging notes, I take it you haven’t fought them yet.”

“We have a non-aggression pact until the Supremacists are gone.”

“Really?” his eyes narrow suspiciously. “Because this is just like them – divide larger groups and then conquer with superior duelling.”

Harry shrugs. “They didn’t attack last we met. Didn’t want the

purebloods' help then either."

Tom is only somewhat reassured after Harry quickly flicks through the memory. "Don't lower your guard," he says. "I've fought them – several times – and disarmed their traps far more often. They made it moderately difficult to keep the Supremacists alive long enough to be useful." His eyes narrow dangerously. "If they manage to kill Bellatrix before my efforts pay off, I will be most *vexed*."

"Doesn't seem very likely. Especially if she has backup."

"No, but a lucky shot for Ganz would be just the opposite for us." His fingers march restlessly up and down. "Less likely when they've been targeting the weakest recently. Mazet or Romanov."

"They nearly got Romanov, didn't they?"

"Explosive runes scattered around the fort," Tom confirms. "He had to regrow everything below the knee."

"Ouch," Harry mutters, and makes a mental note to cast more detection spells.

"Yes, they've been a nuisance all task."

Not the word Harry would've used. He's glad that the letter didn't have any tracking spells.

Evidently, so is Tom. "Do they know where we live?"

"I don't think so."

"Hmm. It's not a great leap to deduce that most champions are near the lake. Even Bellatrix worked that out for herself."

Tom looks to Fleur. She grimaces. "Blocking targeted delivery spells is…"

"Indeed. How are you with blood magic?"

"Blood magic!"

Harry continues reading through the resulting argument. Ganz and Penchev have some quite detailed notes on Supremacist movement.

"They're not leaving a guard in the fort anymore," Harry notices. "I wonder why. Reckon they want strength in numbers?" If he were

them, he'd worry that Tom might turn around and use insider knowledge to break into their fort. Any guard would be easy pickings alone. "Wait, do the Supremacists know you've turned against them?"

Tom shrugs. "Depends how long they expect me to indulge myself before killing you."

If Bellatrix has the slightest idea how much of a hedonist Tom is, she won't expect him back any time soon. But if she thinks he's still on her side, there's no reason for them to suddenly close ranks. "Then the Supremacists might be up to something."

Fleur clicks her tongue. "You know, there is a certain sort of sense in taking the fight to them. Ganz and Penchev would get to choose the time and place."

"You can't be considering it." Hermione only looks up long enough to see if the letter is burning yet.

"Certainly not, but the proposition isn't as crazy as you think."

"The restrictions just make an already unnecessary and dangerous proposition even more unnecessarily dangerous," she sniffs. Harry is treated to a view of the top of her bushy head as she crosses out a variable. "We don't need to deal with the Supremacists at all. They're inconsequential."

He smiles. It would suit her sensibilities if every problem could be solved with an equation. He would also like to go the rest of his life without seeing Bellatrix again, but he's with Fleur on this one – the Supremacists aren't sitting idle, and there's no saying how long it will take the alliance to escape the arena. The smile falls. "Their RADAR must be close to spanning the grounds by now."

"It is," Tom says. "Mazet accumulated a stockpile of runestones. It's only a matter of distributing them."

Fleur grimaces. "I don't suppose you put her under imperius to sabotage it instead before you left?"

Tom pauses. He sniffs primly. "I was otherwise occupied."

"Yeah, thinking of Harry's–"

"Finish that sentence, Granger, and you'll wish you hadn't."

Hermione smirks. "–duelling ability. Why, what did you think I was going to say?"

His glare is unimpressed. "In any case, I take it you've already deduced the borders?"

Fleur summons the heavily doodled map with an impressively straight face. "Here."

"Decent. But this edge is a few degrees off," Tom taps the line, correcting it. "It goes north of that patch of trees. And there are actually two rows around the greenhouses to help cast the net a bit wider – the second is buried."

"Ah, clever."

The net has more than doubled in size since they failed to take out Mazet among the inferi. But Harry's last scouting flight was over a day ago. Krum didn't go out yesterday either, keeping an eye on Cedric while Harry was duelling Riddle. Tom has been with them since, so his information isn't any more up to date.

Harry frowns. A lot can change in twenty-four hours. "I should check."

"It only matters if we go outside," Hermione says. "Now that we have endless food, we have no reason to leave this tent."

Harry doesn't meet Tom's eyes. He does, however, blush. "Right. Not a single one. I don't recall any rules about duelling outside."

"And it's not as if my help is conditional upon spending time together each day."

"Have you been more than five feet apart since?" Cedric mutters.

"*Uninterrupted* was the operative word."

"Your funeral," Fleur says magnanimously.

"*Anyway*," Harry says. "We can't stay holed up here. The Ministry won't stand for it. They'll smoke us out. Literally, if they have to. Guys, we live in a *tree*."

"Your funeral *pyre*," Fleur corrects herself.

Harry snorts. "But seriously, the moment they're not waiting for Riddle to kill us…" he shrugs.

“I give it until the end of the day,” Tom says. He taps his quill pointedly. “I would like to have the spell sorted by then, so we can focus on surviving.”

“And I would like to have room to manoeuvre without summoning Bellatrix everywhere we turn,” Harry says.

“So, what, destroy some RADAR anchors?” Cedric asks.

Fleur hums. “It is possible. Inefficient, since they have a stockpile – we would need to remove many, from a wide area – but possible. We know roughly where the runes are. Poke enough holes and it won’t link up.”

Harry’s gaze falls on the map, then on the letter full of shared intelligence. “I could write Ganz. Give her the locations. She might deploy that pester power in a way that benefits all of us.”

“Practical,” Tom nods.

“If we disrupt it on the west side of the castle and they concentrate on the east, it’ll take much longer for the Supremacists to fix.”

“Assuming Bella has the patience. She may kill Mazet herself if there are any more setbacks.”

“That’s the least surprising thing I’ve heard all day,” Harry says. “You could give Ganz some pointers about the fort, too.”

“Hmm, that would keep them busy away from us… but then so would the RADAR.” Tom eventually shakes his head. “Not yet. Lest they become *too* successful. In fact, it might be best to leave my name out entirely.”

“Why?”

“Could backfire. We are now the most powerful group by far. Spending all their strength on the Supremacists is no longer the best tactical play for Ganz and Penchev. Then again, emotions may cloud their better judgement, since most of us are not purebloods. It could go either way.”

Harry taps the letter. “They’re paying close attention. They’re going to notice soon anyway.”

“They’ll know I left permanently, not where I went.”

“Unless Bellatrix complains loudly, which of course she would *never* do.”

“Fair point.”

“It’s better if it comes from us. They might keep sharing information.”

“It could be a useful channel to keep open. It’s certainly better than getting them offside.” Tom concedes, “Very well.”

“It’s been worth it so far,” Harry points to the last paragraph. “We’ve even got a current location – they’re near the thestral heard.” Casually, he adds, “It sounds like Ivankova is barely keeping ahead of them, but then Bellatrix and Stoeva split off to chase a RADAR ping for an animagus.”

“It must be Poulin. There’s no one else left,” Amelia says.

“Hmm. I did wonder where he was hiding,” Krum frowns.

“Mazet and Romanov alone? *Quite* the opportunity,” Tom’s eyebrows rise. “Really, it seems far too good to be pure chance. Or true.”

A trap, but for who? “I could check it out.”

Tom leans back. “Ah, so that is one of the reasons you want to scout.”

“So what?” He has many reasons. It’s not even in the top three.

“You’re unlikely to see Ivankova. She’s been transfiguring herself into trees and boulders quite effectively, unless she’s running for her life, in which case you should not jump in the middle.”

“I wouldn’t take any unnecessary risks.”

“Define ‘necessary risk’.”

Harry huffs. What has he done to earn such scepticism? Recently? That Tom knows about? He doesn’t think Tom was paying attention to his little not-an-idea earlier.

“If I’m checking the RADAR anyway, I could just set it off somewhere else. A distraction can’t hurt.”

“What do you hope to accomplish? You can’t bring Ivankova into the fold. We’re too close to risk the plan now.”

Harry glances at Krum – his housemate, his call. “She had the choice. She did not want to stay,” Krum says.

“We don’t need to drag her in against her will,” Harry concedes. “Just help her out, so she can keep herself alive long enough for us to end the tournaments forever. Look how well she’s done so far.”

“And she’ll either continue to do so, or she won’t,” Tom says. “It is not your responsibility to save everyone.”

“Uh, Harry,” Hermione cuts in quietly.

She is holding a champion list.

His heart sinks before he finds what he expected: Sasha Pavelova Ivankova.

He hoped… well, never mind now. Her name is several spots below another casualty. “They got Poulin as well. Looks like Ganz was telling the truth.”

Two champions who have survived this long by being exceptionally good at hiding, both suddenly caught in separate incidents. Not a good sign.

Harry stares around at the spell gurus, a sea of grim faces among scattered parchment. “Are we on track to get out of here soon?”

“No,” Tom says.

“Right, then we need to disrupt the RADAR.”

No one argues.

But the third name that catches Harry’s eye as he folds the list – that one he did not expect.

Tom sits forward as Harry’s mind rocks with surprise. “What happened?”

“Mazet is dead.”

Harry stares as the implications sink in. “So do you reckon that was Bellatrix or Ganz?”

“Unless Mazet just stole both kills –unlikely– then Ganz. Using Ivankova or Poulin or both – too much of a coincidence otherwise. But

as bait or just taking advantage of a distraction? Doesn't matter. The Ministry will freak," Tom abruptly changes tune. "Harry, you and I are going elsewhere, so when the Ministry attacks, it doesn't hit *here*. Everyone else, work hard, but stay alert. They could attack multiple locations at once. Meet at the boathouse if you're displaced."

"I'll go scouting," Harry suggests.

Tom's eyes narrow. "You are up to something."

"I have an idea. Half an idea. I don't know. I need to think on it. Flying should help."

"How long do you need?"

"Hmm." It shouldn't take long if he doesn't dither about. "No more than an hour."

"I will start picking off the runes near the greenhouses. Meet me there. If you're late, I will find you. If you're hurt or detained…" his eyes are dangerous slits. "Let's just say you'd better not be hurt. The wrath of Achilles would pale in comparison to mine."

Cedric's brow wrinkles. Fleur shoots Tom a wary look before turning to Hermione, and for once they seem to be of the same mind. Harry does not have time to figure out what's going on there; if it still matters when he returns, he'll worry about it then.

He summons his backpack and the empty potions vials. Can't hurt to carry them, in any case. Harry winces as he stands. "Ow, I ache in places I didn't know I had muscles."

Stretching, as always, initially only makes it worse. What he wouldn't give for the after-exercise salves in his dorm. He almost misses Hermione's scandalised look.

"What? Oh, not like that!" Harry squawks. "The duel – we wrestled – it was a workout!"

Tom is no use at all. "Was it *hard*?"

"It was *difficult*," Harry corrects. *No euphemisms, no inuendoes, control yourself Potter.* "I can't help it if he fights dirty." *Damnit.*

"Nice save," Tom manages to get out around a laugh.

It wouldn't do to let on what that sound does to his insides, so Harry

crosses his arms, although that hurts too. “You just about dislocated my shoulder.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” he grins wickedly. “Want a massage later?”

“Feel free to stop helping.” Harry’s tone is desert dry. He suspects the heat in his face is evaporating all moisture.

…

Harry lands next to Tom’s backpack and a sizeable pile of runestones. There is a faint mark in the grass where the castle wards touch down around the greenhouses, and another at the edge of the grounds a few hundred metres away. It’s not his favourite place; the ward ceiling is always lower than he expects, more like a tunnel since the edges are so close here. Flying into it would be an embarrassing way to die.

“I was about to start looking,” Tom says. He cancels a disillusionment spell, picks up the stone, and tosses it over his shoulder to find its own way to the pile while he stands.

“We should try that sometime. Hide and seek, I mean,” Harry grins.

“Oh, you think you’d have the advantage? I may not be a seeker, but I’m observant.” A quick flick of his eyes scans Harry top to bottom, lingering on the sweat shine along a collar bone.

“Then observe,” Harry spreads his arms. “Still in one piece!”

“Apparently so.” Tom steps in. His fingers brush over each new pulled thread in shirt or trousers, and scuff on leather. Merlin, his memory for detail is incredible. “You… fell out of a tree?”

Harry checks his occlumency, but Tom isn’t cheating. The healing and cleaning charm didn’t trip him up for a moment. Harry’s breathing, just beginning to slow down after the exercise, kicks up again. “Oh, well done.”

Tom grins. The hand trails up to his hair. “Then you were dragged through a thicket backwards.”

“You know full well that’s just how it is,” Harry huffs. He tilts his head into Tom’s hand. “So if you were right, that’d be a lucky guess.”

Tom’s hand leaves his hair long enough to tap a twig on Harry’s nose.

“Wow, how’d that get in there.”

“Truly, a mystery of the ages.”

Harry’s eyes uncross in time to see the wry arch of Tom’s eyebrow smooth out as his gaze falls on the long arch of his throat. Harry swallows. “I thought we were destroying runes,” he manages breathlessly.

“Huh? Later.” Tom reels him into a kiss.

Good, Harry grabs a fistful of his jacket. *Because while I’ve got you alone, we need a plan for beating Grindelwald without duelling.*

If he was anyone else, Harry would worry that admitting distraction would wound his pride.

Transfiguration. Wards. Corral him into a trap where he is immobilised, Tom replies immediately. The idea excites him even more than what Harry is doing with his tongue. Plotting an ambush, getting away with a ruse under the Ministry’s nose – an arm curls around Harry’s back desperately, sending jolts through bruises that weren’t worth healing.

Harry presses closer, glasses biting into his cheek. *I’ll distract him, you set up. Reckon he’d be prepared for pepper spray?*

Undoubtedly. And anything else you’ve used in the tournament.

In that case, they’d better save duelling each other for afterwards. Harry isn’t going to complain if this is how they’ll spend their time instead. In fact, if this is what strategizing is like, he could stand to plan his escapades more often. This coup may end up being the most meticulously organised operation on Hogwarts grounds since the construction of the castle.

We need to control movement. Block reinforcements. I’ve got people in the floo network.

In lift maintenance too? Get them to stop travel between floors.

Or reroute them, Tom makes an intrigued noise deep in his throat.

Harry shivers. *Instant darkness powder. Illusions. Hide some important hallways. The Ministry is a warren.*

Yes – bottlenecks, disorientation. We can leave any route behind us in impassable chaos if we don’t need our own reinforcements to follow.

Then explosions, and –

And my hyenas.

What?

Not where you were going with that? My apologies, continue.

No, no, I want to know how you could possibly make use of hyenas in that context.

A loud crack of displaced air sends them springing apart.

Harry spots the looming shadow before anything else, and that's enough to aim an impedimenta with one hand and protego with the other. If the size of the shadow is any indication, it should be difficult to miss.

But that's as far as he gets before Tom conjures enormous boulders which slam into place around and above them.

The creature roars and the improvised cave is suddenly awash with yellow and heat. Fire drips like liquid through the cracks between the stones. Flames dance in the gleam of Tom's grin.

"One more for luck?" Harry doesn't wait for permission, the feral smile too tempting not to kiss.

He shrinks from between Tom's arms and flies in a wide arc, rolling around snapping jaws. It overextends the lunge, missing by miles, only for a second head to try from above. He dodges leisurely. The Whomping Willow is faster, but then again, the Willow can't breathe fire.

Harry skims along its back, so it can't roast him without also dousing itself.

Which it proves it doesn't mind at all a second later.

He pivots at the first sizzling sounds, winging it away from the heat until he reaches a good flanking position.

Harry transforms at a cautious distance. He has a hunch that flame freezing charms won't be very effective if the burning substance sticks to flesh half as well as it does to stone. One of the hydra's many heads clocks him, and it slithers around.

It looks nothing like a runespoor, for all that they're both built on the same theme that the hydra just took way too far. The body is where

the snake resemblance ends. The hydra's heads aren't sleek; they're blocky, with irregular raised scales more like a lizard, and rows of teeth instead of fangs. And spikes. Lots and lots of spikes.

It looks like it was assembled by someone who thought a bouquet of devil's snare wasn't bad enough, which does make him wonder. "Has someone been pruning this thing like a bloody hedge?"

It is a very inconvenient number of heads to deal with using the strategy that worked against the horntail. He'd have to hit them one-by-one with langlock. Several rear back and spit before he can get a single spell off.

Harry gambles – it behaves like a burning liquid, he'll treat it like liquid. He has diverted bigger streams. The fire freezes into a jagged ice wall, but the momentum keeps it moving forward and cracking apart. Harry strains to catch all the chunks in a levitation spell, and banishes them.

The hydra appreciates being pelted with ice much less than being bathed in fire. Before it can retaliate, the boulders launch with the force of a trebuchet, slamming into its side one after another.

"Now that'd be an odd job to explain to new acquaintances. Hydra lopper," Tom says.

The hydra rolls with the force of the blow, shaking the ground as much as the boulders, before righting itself with a furious roar that echoes oddly out of too many throats.

Tom gets a good look at the creature for the first time. He looks as thrilled by the towering threat as Harry feels. It's bigger than the basilisk. Probably bigger than the horntail.

"Surely the job title would be head trimmer," Harry says.

"Or branch manager."

Guess this means you successfully provoked the Ministry. Now precisely how pissed do we want our benefactors?

Just do whatever comes naturally.

Apoplectic, then. Brilliant. Harry bares his teeth.

"Quick, I'll distract it. You try striking from its blind spot," Harry

widens his eyes in faux dismay. “Oh, wait.”

Tom snorts. He conjures a chain, anchoring one end in bedrock and launching the other over its back. Harry catches the chain at the peak of its arc, guides it in a loop around the mass of necks, and anchors the other end. The chain cinches tight, slamming the heads into the ground.

“The gamemaker planning sessions must be a riot. Oh, to be a fly on the wall.” Tom brushes aside a stream of fire. He pitches his voice up, sharpening into Umbridge’s upper-class accent. “The problem with the dragon and the basilisk – not enough heads. The inferi and dementors had enough heads, collectively, but none of them breathed fire. By Jove, we have them this time!”

Harry barely dodges a gout of said fire, doubled over. “Fuck, don’t make me laugh!”

“I’ve got to make it somewhat challenging. Honestly, pitting a hydra against the pair of us – it’s just not sporting.”

Harry transforms briefly, hopping over the hydra’s thrashing tail. It’s not a Greek species – they’re not so spicy – but from what he remembers, the cut and cauterise method is fairly standard regardless. But he really doesn’t like the idea of dismembering a living creature. Then again, they don’t have to defeat it, they just have to make the Ministry trigger its portkey. Or…

He blinks, then smirks. “You know what I think would be funny?”

“Replacing the House of Lords with sock puppets and seeing if broader society notices or minds.”

“When did you–? Well, yes, but that’s not exactly relevant right now.”

“Beats me, then,” Tom cedes the stage.

“Wouldn’t it be funny if we could completely cheese the system. Find a really simple solution to deal with any monster they send our way. Soon enough they’d stop interrupting us.”

Tom jumps to realisation, his mind cackles, *oh I love the way you think*. “And what might that be?”

Harry reaches into a pocket. He quickly checks that it’s one of the empty vials. It’s already set up with an undetectable extension charm.

He tests the heft, then boosts the distance with a banishing spell. "Catch!"

The potions vial changes trajectory only slightly, summoned right into Tom's hand. Adding a localised anti-portkey ward only takes a moment.

"*Engorgio*." The vial swells until the opening is several feet across. It means nothing for the expanded space inside, but it does ensure – as Tom levitates it over the bundle of heads – that the vial won't just ping uselessly off its hide when he drops it.

But before he can, the Ministry triggers the hydra's portkey.

Harry staggers under the wind and shockwave as the air rushes to fill the empty space. The vial shatters in the backlash.

"Huh," he says when his ears stop ringing. "I didn't actually expect them to forfeit."

"When the alternative is letting us turn it into an expensive sponsor gift?" Tom's lips twists into a smirk, "Seems like that'd be rewarding bad behaviour, really."

"I'd have thought that was still better than admitting to *impotence*."

Ah, the rock and the hard place – Harry must say, he prefers being on this side of the trap. Their exploit would've been proven effective either way, but it's one thing for champions to survive the Ministry's murder attempts sometimes, it's another entirely to let slip that their grip on the situation isn't ironclad. Because if the Ministry aren't in complete control, people might realise they aren't omnipotent. That's the problem with dealing in absolutes – a single slip can shake loose the faith or fear.

Harry stretches tall, the pull of warm muscles adding to his satisfaction.

"Hmm, decent workout." It cleared the stiffness right out of his shoulders. Riddle's eyes linger long after Harry catches him looking, so he takes his time. He's charitable like that.

He isn't putting it on just to stir the Ministry, though; he will get spoilt if there are many more days like this. It won't last, the gamemakers will surely adapt, but for the moment he can savour a strike at the real enemy after months of being pitted school against school, students

against inquisitor, champions against arena. The Ministry has no end of proxies to do their bidding and absorb any retaliation. They think they can deal out blows, untouchable. He loves to prove that they're not. And while Harry gets a certain vindictive glee from undermining them while they're oblivious, subterfuge is much more Tom's thing. Harry gets his kicks from fronting up to a threat, forcing it to pull up short. Stunts like this are exactly what he wants to do.

It's exactly what his father did, and it got both him and Lily killed.

Harry pauses. He can practically hear Snape calling him too cocky, too angry, just like James. He took aim at a target far beyond his abilities. It wasn't enough to trick the gamemakers, he wanted to spit in their faces, to bare his heart and refuse to play by the Ministry's rules. It would never have worked, forcing Snape to clean up the mess, but there was only so much he could salvage.

Harry hopes he isn't making the same mistake. The escape spell isn't ready yet – they're jumping the gun if Tom wants the development finished in peace. If the spell works, there are countless other points where the rebellion could flat out fail. If it succeeds, at what cost? To stop James, the Ministry went after Lily and Snape. Umbridge punished Hermione to hurt Harry. The Weasleys, Remus –

Hey. The brief warning before a hand clamps down on the back of his neck is the only thing that stops Harry jumping out of his skin. Tom leans into his forehead, eye to eye. *We can handle it.*

Can everyone, or just us?

You're catastrophising. They will not attack your family to send you a message that you can't see from here. And if they did, I would know. The hand squeezes. *Trust me.*

Harry isn't so sure. "What do you suppose are the chances we can still catch the hydra if we head back to base right now?"

…

Harry is pleasantly surprised to see the tree house is still standing. Cedric – the real Cedric – is pacing the front room, but it isn't long after they pass the security questions until Hermione settles the illusion around them.

"Any trouble?" Harry asks.

“Nothing,” Cedric says. “You weren’t long. I take it you had fun.”

“That we did. But I won’t keep it all to myself.” He double, triple checks he didn’t pick up Tom’s backpack by mistake, before reaching in and pulling out an orange and purple box. “I brought presents. Now, who’s brave enough to open it?”

Amelia hides her hands behind her back and declares, “Not it!”

“You found it!” Hermione sweeps their work aside, smiling like she hasn’t in weeks.

He deposits it in front of her, admiring her guts. He refuses to feel embarrassed about hiding behind a protego because you never know with the twins. Hermione shields the parchment instead, proving her unfortunate insanity.

“Right, let’s get this over with.” But nothing happens when she gives the password, or when she gingerly lifts the lid.

Harry tenses. Maybe it’ll be triggered by reaching inside, or standing up, or it could be on a time delay and the runes on the lid could just be a distraction. The twins have been known to make their rune schemes unnecessarily complicated just to include rude words transcribed into Elder Futhark.

Hermione waits. “Oh, for goodness’ sake,” she gives up on patience, but nothing continues to happen, until she peers over the top.

Something red and furry springs out in a blur. She recoils with a shriek, topples a chair and nearly follows it down. Shrieking turns to laughing when the thing lets out an eery but distinctly happy cackle. It’s bad enough real foxes make that sound – coming from a plushie it’s downright terrifying.

“One day! One day, I swear, they’re not going to get me!”

The fox wags its tail, and when she pats its head, it nuzzles her in return, leaving two pawprints of orange paint on her cheeks.

Krum chortles. “Not today. Today they got you twice.”

“What the?” she touches the wetness. “Ugh, Fred!” But she only holds the toy tighter.

The box is a jackpot. George’s entire emergency stash of dungbombs,

and just about enough fireworks to reach the moon. Screaming yo-yos are mixed in with decoy detonators and extendable ears. They could host a formal afternoon tea with the amount of fine China, if they weren't too phased by the weather – tiny flashes of lightning hint at what's to come if the teacups are removed from the saucers.

Tom hooks his chin over Harry's shoulder. "Oh, excellent." A hand sneaks around his waist to the packets of instant darkness powder. "That is going to come in handy."

Removing the lose items reveals, "Clothes?"

"Hmm? That's not part of the usual catalogue," Hermione says.

"Hold on," Harry recognises that shade of emerald green near the bottom. Mrs Weasley swears it brings out his eyes. "That's mine!" And it looks like his trunk wasn't the only one they pilfered – a scrunched balled of Ron's maroon is on top.

Hermione digs, pushing aside the priceless pranks, spilling knitted gloves and hats onto the table, until she reaches two soft blue bundles. The first one she unfolds has a bold F emblazoned on front. She shrugs out of her jacket immediately, sinking into the oversized jumper. She buries her face in the collar, blinking rapidly.

Harry eyes one of the hats with trepidation. "Why do I get the feeling that is going to eat my head?" He pokes it, and jolts back in surprise. It's downright *soaked* in magic. He trails his fingers along the knitted rows, up to where it's concentrated in the pompom. "It feels like… a shield charm?"

"What?" Tom near snatches it from his hands. "Surely not, but it is. How?" He turns it inside out, following the thread. "Ah. Wait, where is the torsion – oh, it's taking advantage of the rounded shape in the projection, I suppose that balances out the disadvantage of the flexible medium."

"Non-destructive testing only," Harry says sternly as he dives into the box. "At least until *after* we're safe."

The jumpers and gloves are the same, but the jumpers are the warmest, and he doesn't just mean that they're thicker. The magic is still shield-flavoured, but a subtly different – more mulled wine than butterbeer, for all the sense that makes.

It looks like the twins gathered every item of winter-wear that they

could. Ginny's jumper will fit Amelia, or Hermione for that matter, but he doesn't fancy his chances of getting her out of Fred's without losing a limb. She's unlikely to be tempted by her own jumper, so Harry tosses that one at Fleur. Cedric is already pulling on a grey, slightly singed number that looks suspiciously like it might've belonged to Percy. Harry hands George's to Krum because it's the least he can do after the twins went to so much effort.

Krum traces the collar. "Look at the anchor points, the spaces between. It could have just been a line, but it is a pattern. Code. Pi. Equations in fabric," he shakes his head in amazement, and if George ever hears about this his life will be complete.

Tom leans over. "Four…square root… hmm, that radius is a little small. Ah! No, that makes sense, it will only project if an incoming spell gets closer than a regular shield would block. A hidden failsafe. Useful."

Harry finally reaches green. He closes his eyes as his hands sink into the soft wool, the yarn that never frays no matter how much he wears it. His heart settles. Now it feels like Christmas.

"Here," he carefully hands his jumper to Tom.

"Strong magic," Tom observes when he feels it. He holds it out.

Harry shakes his head. "Put it on."

Tom blinks. "You love this jumper."

"So don't pull it apart and I won't have to strangle you with its remains," Harry says, unconcerned. But maybe he shouldn't assume Tom would have the same aversion to a stranger's castoffs as Ron or Hermione just because he also grew up poor. Maybe he cares more about colour. "Unless you'd rather maroon?"

"I'd rather yours," Tom says quickly. Perhaps too quickly, heedless of their audience. Darting eyes check if anyone noticed.

Yours, he'd said, not green. Harry ducks into Ron's jumper to hide his smile. It isn't visible beneath the armour jacket when he shrugs it back on. The hats, though, might be a problem. Flattened hair will look weird even if the wool is disillusioned. Harry does not want to repay the Weasley's by getting them arrested for aiding and abetting.

Cedric is watching Tom suspiciously.

Before Tom can do anything drastic to redirect attention, Harry rifles through his pockets for the potions flasks he'd filled on his trip. "Here," he places one carefully in front of Tom. "Don't ever say I don't get you nice things."

Movement catches his eye. Tom lifts the flask. There are many tiny spiders running around the glass. "What's the occasion?"

"A surprise party for our enemies. I think releasing them in their base will cause a nice distraction." Not that Bellatrix is the type of girl to shriek about tiny spiders. Harry bites back a smirk at Tom's raised eyebrow. Of course there's more to it. Not secret spy spiders or deadly venom, no, "They'll get bigger."

"These look familiar," Cedric murmurs, tapping the vial. "I could swear I've seen them around the castle."

"Engorgio?" Tom asks suspiciously. That trick is easily cancelled, but there are some tedious ways to make it more robust.

"You'd want the opposite."

Tom laughs, delighted.

Cedric stares blankly for a moment. Then he puts the vial down very carefully. "Tell me those are not *acromantulas*."

"You got me another army, oh darling, you shouldn't have, how thoughtful!" Tom's voice is all artificial sweetness, but his smile – that's real, the warm delight in his mind spilling over.

"Ah," Hermione realises, "then by our enemy base, you mean…"

Harry sets out another vial, another and another, until there are a dozen miniature worlds on the table. All the while, he watches Fleur carefully. She is pale but her eyes aren't going distant, back to the first task.

"You want to unleash acromantulas on people," Fleur says blankly. Shock or anger, he can't tell, until it sharpens in her eyes. "On the people who killed that little girl. Let's see how entertaining they find it from the other side."

"Call it plan C. If we can't get DA or Order backup into the Ministry, for any reason, we can still deploy sparklers and spiders to occupy the aurors while we kickstart the riots."

“Oh no, that is *not* plan C,” Tom says.

“Yes, it is,” Harry glares. “Indiscriminate class five creatures and underage students are not a good mix.”

“Most of the duelling would take place in the Atrium or outside,” he wheedles.

“Right, and I can’t think of a *single student* who’ll try to follow us into Magical Games and Sports.”

“Speaking of that department – Fleur is right, the gamemakers deserve it.”

“They do, but are you planning to ever *leave* the media control room?” Harry highly doubts that Grindelwald will come to them. They’d have to fight through acromantulas to get to him.

“We needn’t release the beasts on our way in. Think of it more as a parting gift.” His mind flashes a picture of a barricaded control room, his minions holding the fort that aurors can’t even reach through a moat of acromantulas. All the corridors need is hidden flame throwers and axes swinging from the ceiling.

Harry snorts entirely inappropriate laughter.

Tom leans forward, sensing weakness. “Come now, the irony is delicious. Seeing the Ministry floundering in their fortress under their own monsters will be *just the thing* to rally a nation of cynics. But if it’s collateral that concerns you, how about Umbridge’s office?”

Harry pauses.

Tom pounces. “It’s on the way,” he adds blithely.

“Well, I mean,” Harry can feel his resolve crumbling by the word, “if it’s on the way.”

Amelia leads the cheers.

“Alright, alright, I know when I’m outvoted.” Harry finishes emptying his pockets. He pushes the pile of empty vials toward Amelia. “You’re our monster expert – hold onto these, and if you think of anything else we can make the Ministry’s problem, we’ll go hunting while these swots gather dust. Gotta go for forest natives, nothing they can just portkey away. That’s how we lost our hydra.”

"*What hydra!*"

…

"Another dead end," Tom says.

"Maybe not," Krum objects. "Just let me finish…"

But he doesn't get far before a red glow under his palm startles him. Tom twirls a finger, and the light circles a term in an equation halfway down the page a few more times. "You're going to end up with a very big number if you divide by that."

"When? Oh, don't tell me –"

"The Leibniz conditions apply. It's a fundamental feature of the counter."

Krum throws his quill down with a groan.

"Ugh, I hate calculus," Fleur massages her temples in small circles, wincing. "I liked arithmancy better in fifth year when infinity was unapproachable."

Hermione mutters her way through, checking their working. She reaches the same conclusion. "Hopeless. Reduce it by a factor of two or twenty, it's still shooting to the moon in under a second!"

"*Ugh*." Again, emphasised the way only the French can. "Our buffers and layers might as well not exist!"

"Alright," Cedric's smile cuts like lightning through the brewing storm. "That's good to know. What's the root of the problem?"

The smile wins startled silence, but Hermione can't leave a question unanswered for long. "The darkness differential. The counter is just too light to combine with the curse in any way short of explosively."

The abrasive sarcasm slides right off him. "Could we make the counter greyer?"

"Not without reconstructing it from the ground up. It's too specific. Perfectly ordered. Tweak one parameter and all the others go out of whack. That's partly why it's so light."

"Do we have to use that spell? Making a new counter-curse doesn't sound any harder than what we've been doing."

“It… shouldn’t be?” Hermione straightens and flicks through a few scrolls. “If we aim for a smothering-type counter, at least both spells would be dark.”

Krum shakes his head. “No. Two overpowering dark curses multiplied together? Too strong, too difficult to cast.”

“Would it be easier to make the curse lighter instead?”

“Yes, and less effective,” Tom interrupts. “We know the original triggers the portkey. We’d need to test any variation on another champion, which would risk tipping our hand to the Ministry. Last resort.”

“What we need is something like an anti-curse,” Krum says. “A curse that perfectly opposes the effects of another curse. It would be *so* much easier to calculate that combination.”

“But not a smothering-type counter – an actual, opposite curse? I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Hermione says.

“Certainly you have, but you may call them differently in English. Some healing spells are dark. If it treats symptoms rather than snuffs out the source magic, then it is an anti-curse.”

“Ah, yes. I don’t think we have a term, actually.”

“They’re not unheard of, but not exactly standard practice. What you’re proposing is going to be much harder than you make it sound,” Tom says. “It would be quicker to add a powerful light element, such as unicorn blood. Incorporate some ritual magic. Now that I think of it, it might be possible to tap into the power of the tournament itself–”

“For *superpowered* eternal damnation,” Harry elbows him, because he might not be able to compute multivariable calculus in differential geometry, but he is uniquely qualified to survive interrupting Tom when an interesting theoretical problem escapes containment. The less said about The Necromancy Saga, the better. “Unicorn blood is the new last resort.”

“It was only an example,” Tom says, after a mulish second. That second is the concerning part. It is a well-we-wouldn’t-need-unicorn-blood-if-we-had-seven-puppies, or a maybe-virgin-sacrifice-will-do-in-a-pinch sort of silence. “Also, what I’m hearing is that necromancy is back on the table.”

“Why is an anti-curse so tricky?” Harry asks him, the same way he’d toss a feather for Crookshanks to sink his teeth into when there are vulnerable toes about. “Because if it’s just the standard healing reasons…” Harry guesses that it’d have to perfectly oppose the effects of the curse, including the intensity, to bring everything back to equilibrium. Get the blood pressure slightly wrong in either direction and it’ll cause an aneurysm or fainting – and that’s just one health factor.

“There is a reason healers prefer to stabilise with spells and then solve the problem with potions,” Tom snorts, but his mind tells a different story. It’s an intricate problem, something he can relish. “But there’s an issue if we want to reverse symptoms,” Tom grins, “Hermione.”

She pauses her furtive flicking through scrolls. “We haven’t discussed – but we must be able to deduce – I mean, what precisely does the heart attack curse do?”

“Ah,” Harry says. He elbows Tom again, “Quit laughing at me, you prick.”

“Stamata kardia translates to ‘stop heart’. Then ‘heart attack’ is probably a misnomer. Even the worst heart attacks retain a heartbeat and aren’t immediately fatal. I can’t imagine a death-sensing portkey would trigger if there is still a pulse,” Hermione reasons.

“You’re right, it actually causes cardiac arrest,” Tom says. “But regardless, an anti-curse doesn’t necessarily exist for every problem. Some problems simply call for light solutions, and there isn’t much wiggle room when you’re countering specific symptoms. It is not a promising sign that the existing counter-curse is so light.”

“I don’t know, Riddle. It would manipulate a vital organ, force blood from the simplest state of stillness into motion, introducing turbulence – introducing chaos. It seems like we could get something dark if we approach it the right way,” Krum says.

“You’re assuming there is no activity, so anything you do will increase disorder.”

“Well yes, if the heart has stopped.”

“Not necessarily. There is no pulse, but that doesn’t mean there is no muscle movement. There are a few different types of cardiac arrest.”

“But only one is relevant. The portkey is on the pacemaker cells,”

Harry says.

You'd think he threw a kneazle into the conversation, the way they stop and stare.

"How do you know exactly where it is?" Fleur eventually dares ask.

"I was awake, of course."

"What – how – *why*?"

"I asked the healer not to put me under? Doesn't matter." Harry didn't think the idea was *that* disturbing, especially since they didn't have to watch it, but they don't seem to be catching on. At the risk of overexplaining the obvious, he tries to prod them back on track, "If the portkey was only checking for a pulse or blood-flow, they could stick it anywhere, but it's on a tiny target – it must be there for a reason."

"You don't think it's just checking for a pulse?" Krum asks.

Krum didn't spend much time in healing lessons, Harry recalls, but the others don't look any more enlightened for some reason. He frowns, "If that's all it's looking for, I don't see how it'd work without triggering on heart murmurs and other fairly common events. It could wait to check if there is a long period without a pulse to be certain, but we know it isn't doing that, since the curse activated it instantly."

"Mhmm. The Ministry is not overly incentivised to give champions the most time possible to heal each other," Hermione says.

She should know where Harry is going with this – unless he's missed something? His mind spins through lessons in restoring blood pressure, clearing clots, treating dehydration and muscle paralysis. Hopkirk drilled it into him; don't fixate on heart diagnostics, it usually isn't a problem with the heart that makes it stop in the arena – treat the root cause not the symptom. No, the curse doesn't vanish blood or anything to indirectly make the heart fail, the counter spell wouldn't heal anything like that, he can rule it out.

"The pacemaker sends the electrical signal to start the heartbeat," he tells Krum. "So checking there will let you know if the heart is still trying or if it has completely given up the ghost."

"Oh, so you think the curse causes an asystole rhythm – the portkey triggers because it registers no pacemaker signal," Hermione says.

“That is the end point for all types of cardiac arrest eventually, so it makes sense if they want to be thorough.”

“No, we can rule it out, I think it’s the other one with wonky electrical signals.”

“Ventricular fibrillation?”

“Sure,” if that’s what it’s called.

“Why?” Amelia asks.

Tom is staring. Well, they all are, but Harry can’t recognise the expression dawning over his face, some estranged cousin of realisation. None of the others seem like they have the slightest idea where he’s going with this.

Harry falters. If it isn’t as obvious as he thinks, maybe he made a basic, embarrassing mistake. The prospect seems much worse than losing a practice duel against Bellatrix on global broadcast, but he was willing to take that beating and get back up, he can do no less now. “If the pacemaker doesn’t send signals, the heart stops entirely. No electrical activity, no movement. It’s the simplest possible state. Any way you try to heal that is going to make it more disorganised, so all possible counter curses must be dark. But we’re in this mess because they’re not.” He pauses, shifting in his seat. “If I understand chaos correctly.”

Tom steeples his fingers. He does not blink. “You understand perfectly. Keep talking.”

“Er, alright.” But Harry has mostly said his piece. For lack of direction, he starts to ramble, “So we’re dealing with a heart that just spasms uselessly. It’s not coordinated, that’s why it can’t pump blood.”

“But ventricular fibrillation is characterised by electrical problems in the ventricles. The pacemaker is in the right atrium, upstream, so the pacemaker signals could be normal,” Hermione points out.

“Yeah, that’s why I don’t think the curse causes the ventricle problems directly – the portkey wouldn’t have gone off with a normal pacemaker. But stamata kardia – we know it doesn’t stop the heart, what it if stops the *pacemaker* long enough for it to fall out of sync with the ventricles – that could set off *both*. Hmm, and it would explain the counter spell.”

“Would it? Who taught you the theory?” Hermione sounds distinctly jealous. She needn’t be; she didn’t miss any lessons.

Harry scrunches his nose. Why learn theory when he can just memorise the incantations the theory is propping up? “I mean, restituo? It just doesn’t move like a healing spell. It’s tarantallegra with a few quirks, practically another dancing charm, the way all the pattern and movement is baked in.”

“Or a metronome,” Tom says. He is too still, like a snake coiled to strike. “The counter spell could be entraining the muscle contractions to make it realign with a regular rhythm.”

“Oh, so it’s literally bringing order to contraction chaos? Explains why it’s so light,” Harry muses. “But there’s no healing component – that’s still weird.”

“So we need a way to fix arrythmia that doesn’t impose rhythm,” Cedric says.

“That is inconvenient,” Krum grimaces.

“Harry, speak up.” Tom flicks a silencing spell at Cedric and Hermione before they even open their mouths.

“Hmm? Okay. Is there no healing component in restituo because there’s no damage from the curse? We can check. We should probably check.” He learnt a *lot* of diagnostic spells; something is bound to be useful. “If there’s no damage, no permanent upset to the pacemaker cells, you shouldn’t need to force order. I mean, the heart already has a clock – metronome, whatever. The pacemaker cells are still keeping time, the signal is just being drowned out… if you could get rid of the nonsense…”

“The heartbeat might go back to normal,” Tom finishes the thought. “A different solution, a different kind of inverse.”

“Exactly! Don’t force it to start beating regularly – make it *stop*.”

“Depolarise all the muscle cells, overwrite all their nerve signals simultaneously – a lightning curse! The muscle cells will be at the same point in the cycle–”

“–and it’ll be quiet enough for the pacemaker signal to reassert itself.”

“I need a rat,” Tom says abruptly. “*Accio*.”

“What?” Amelia’s eyes widen as a brown rodent sails into his hand. Tom swiftly stuns it to avoid being bitten. “What are you going to do to it?”

“Mammalian heart. It’s a decent enough analogue that if we can keep it alive, I’d be confident developing it further for ourselves.”

“It’s for *testing*?”

“I’m not going to kill it,” Tom says impatiently. “Then I’d just need to get another one. *Stamata kardia*,” he casts before there can be any further objections.

Harry quickly casts several diagnostic spells. Sure enough, no pulse.

“*Keravnós. Fulmen. Dealanach,*” Tom starts smoothly cycling through spells, despite the jarring pronunciation changes. He produces only tiny sparks, which, for spells more suited to obliterating the entire tree around them, is an impressive feat.

Lactic acid is building up in the rat’s muscle. Blood is leaking from capillaries. A monitoring spell flashes an amber warning.

“*Eldingaráfall. Blikseminslag. Gaj.*”

Tissue health starts seriously falling. Oxygen depletion. It’s most obvious in the brain and lungs.

“*Keravnós. Fulmen,*” Tom starts again, a little stronger. The rat jolts. Fleur straightens, but sinks back down when it’s clear the rat didn’t move on its own. “*Fulmen.*”

Why did it move? Tom didn’t bump it with his wand. “Oh, the muscles contracted – that’s a good sign,” Harry murmurs.

Tom only concentrates. “*Fulmen. Fulmen.”*

“Pulse!” Harry calls.

Everyone freezes. Except for the rat. Whiskers twitch, then the tail. It rolls to its feet, shocking Harry back to action. He checks the monitoring spells, healing as he goes. “I think most of the damage was caused by being out for so long. Except the slight burn on its skin.” He adds a numbing spell, sorry that he couldn’t before without potentially interfering with the electricity.

Blood flow returns to its limbs and clots break up without a fuss. The

damaged cells in the brain and other organs regenerate. Soon, every monitoring spell comes back clear, showing no curse damage from either spell.

It's entirely reversible. A true anti-curse. And it looks like if they get it slightly wrong, it won't cause issues they can't heal.

"We can do it," Cedric breathes.

They already did the hard yards figuring out the layering recipe; now they've got the right ingredients. A little refinement, a few tests to see how strong it needs to be on a larger heart –

Harry yelps as an invisible force shoves him into Tom's reach and grasping hands take over, yanking him into a bruising kiss.

"Your incorrigible nosiness," Tom says against his mouth, "is one of my favourite things about you."

"Merlin, maybe they are made for each other," Hermione mutters.

"Slander! Lies and – Tom, hold up, I'm taking offence."

"Multitask," Tom orders, and kisses him again.

…

With the spell on track, there is no reason to hold back from daring the Ministry to do their worst. Tom promptly loses anything even remotely approaching restraint. Harry had thought he'd reached that point earlier, but evidently not. Not when he drives the dinner conversation topic from their afternoon exercise to Hercules' hydra and labours, and then into an academic discussion of the common themes in myths about Greek kings. Except, the stories aren't quite the same as Harry learned in history of magic, where kings rose and fell at the whims of the gods. Tom spins a story of hubris and poetic downfall. Agamemnon, Theseus, Minos, Bellerophon, Creon, more.

The message is about as thinly veiled as a dementor in a nightgown.

"It's more sinister than the overt praise-the-regime propaganda," Tom says. And there goes the nightgown. Harry pinches the bridge of his nose. "Even if you have your eyes open for manipulation, it can still slip past. Tell a lie often enough and it becomes true in every sense that matters, tilting our culture in a thousand little ways to make us more susceptible to control."

It sets off a debate about whether correct answers on the history OWL are actually right, but it's hard to argue with someone who can quote Homer and Hesoid verbatim and explain precisely where translations have been creatively reinterpreted.

Harry would be amused by the panic Tom is setting off in fifth and seventh years across Europe, if there was any chance the Ministry is broadcasting this conversation. The rest of the champions could be sleeping, the commentators could run out of replays, and they would make the public stare at a blank screen first. As it is, Hermione is having enough of a crisis for everyone, unsure whether to regret her Outstanding.

Harry knows just what she needs.

"Mr Scamander said that nundus aren't responsible for any of the plagues, their poison doesn't spread from person to person. So we shouldn't dismiss the evidence that it spread to Europe from central Asia," Amelia says.

Harry shrugs carelessly. "Don't look at me. History isn't my forte."

"Harry," Hermione vents to the world at large, "fell *asleep* in the *OWL* exam."

"I did enough to get an Acceptable."

As always, it only offends her more. "Then imagine if you'd *studied*."

"Why? I was never going to sit the NEWT."

Her nostrils flare like an angry bull. "Amelia, do not listen to this degenerate. You should always try your best." She glares around, daring anyone to argue.

Tom opens his mouth. Harry raises a finger without looking and shuts it for him.

"Come on, it's time for bed. We should set a double guard tonight which means some of us better turn in now if we're going to be fresh tomorrow," Harry says. It doesn't take Trelawney to see there is trouble coming. They're asking for it so nicely.

Harry and Krum take a quick flight to check nothing is on fire or otherwise amiss. Krum heads back to the secret room to run the calculations with the new parameters while Hermione takes watch.

She'll maintain the illusion that Harry and Tom are with her, although they won't be on shift until the wee hours of the morning. It's better that the Ministry assume they're on high alert now, and reserve whatever horrors they're planning for daylight when they think the alliance will be tired.

"Guys, have you seen my…?" Harry's eyes snap to the sliver of skin visible where Tom is lifting the hem of his shirt, posed as if he'd started to take it off. Harry promptly forgets why he walked into the room. "Er… what are you doing?"

"Getting ready for bed now so I don't disturb everyone later."

"Really." He didn't sleep shirtless before. He hasn't even changed into pyjamas with Harry in the room.

Tom widens his eyes innocently. "I was too hot last night. Need fewer layers if we're combining sleeping bags again."

Annnnd there goes the shirt over his head. Arms up, pulling his lean abdomen taught. There isn't a scar on him, despite what he's been through. He hasn't faced anything more skilled than he is.

He is too hot, alright.

"Cooling charms," Harry babbles, "or – you have a tattoo." He blinks, but the black smudge on Tom's ribs doesn't resolve into bruising or dirt.

Harry is surprised an appropriate amount, he thinks. He doesn't gasp like Hermione, or choke like Cedric, or lose his eyebrows like Fleur. They can't be that shocked that Harry hasn't seen it before; he has a modicum of self-control.

Tom turns to give him a clearer view. *Oh*, Harry jolts. "Like it? It's my own design."

It's a symbol anyone from Torquay to Timbuktu should recognise by now, with the fireworks and destruction of the blood quill propelling it from local Hogwarts folklore to worldwide infamy. It has gone far from its humble origins graffitied on the awful defence professor's door, but hasn't lost it's meaning – a deliberate association with rebellion built over *years* by this man, Harry realises, because it's not just a symbol, it's a *signature*.

Tom must want to make that explicitly clear if he's showing it off

outside the privacy wards.

“Yours, huh.” The skull grins at him. The snake doesn’t look as friendly. “So we have you to thank for getting rid of Lockhart.”

Oh yeah, Harry can see it. Tom does not abide fools. Or memory charms. Lockhart is still in Azkaban for those, the last Harry heard. In hindsight, it’s only surprising that Tom hasn’t also exorcised Professor Binns. But maybe he worries the replacement could be worse while the Ministry has a hand in putting applicants forward. After all, they’ve had a few defence professors that barely tripped over Lockhart’s low bar. Three guesses why Hogwarts hasn’t been able to retain them for a full year.

“If Dumbledore could hire someone competent, I wouldn’t have to enforce basic educational standards.”

“I retroactively forgive everything horrible you’ve ever done,” Hermione mutters fervently.

Harry looks up, checking, but the glint in Tom’s eye confirms he wants to blow everything wide open. The least Harry can do is set the stage. “I always marvelled that they didn’t trace the pranks back to you, but you *signed your work*, and Umbridge still had no idea.” He doesn’t have to fake the incredulousness as he shakes his head. Amelia’s jaw drops. “How’d you get away with it? Didn’t anyone recognise it?”

Tom jabs the skull in the eye sockets. It blinks and vanishes, leaving the snake innocently flicking her tongue. “This is all my dormmates might’ve glimpsed. Unremarkable. Plenty of graduates get tattoos to honour their House.” Another poke and the skull fades back into view, swiftly taking on the defined, grinning shape. “But a competent auror force really should have caught me. What kind of circus can’t backtrace a howler? Honestly,” he tsks.

After whatever safeguards Tom added to it? Harry would be impressed if anyone could. But the truth isn’t going to embolden the public to step out from under the Ministry’s thumb. Harry keeps his mouth shut.

“I suppose that’s an inevitable consequence after decades of promoting people for obedience rather than skill. Competence is stifled under the management of obsequious fools, until the only people capable of doing the job get fed up being unappreciated and overworked, and they quit,” Tom snorts. “That is how you get an entire investigative task force that couldn’t handle a few measly students.”

"*You* destroyed the blood quill," Amelia's eyes well up, long mornings spent comforting Görder spilling over. "*Thank you*."

"Team effort," Tom says magnanimously, shifting so that Harry is firmly between him and the teary girl. "But I did get to roast its corpse."

"And rub Umbridge's face in it," Harry says, shaking his head at the gall.

Tom doesn't match his grin. He takes two steps closer, and Harry's view is far more obscured by miles of pale shoulders that he cannot lick in front of his friends. "She went too far."

Harry loosens his clenched fists when Tom runs a thumb over the back of his writing hand, finding the slightly calloused remains of his scrawl. It does not help Harry's reflex to grab him.

Neither does the kiss he ghosts over Harry's knuckles.

The howler was a mercy. She is lucky I didn't enchant the quill to copy the cross-species relationship guidebook along her every limb.

And you'd call her out for going too far.

Someone would've kept her going with blood-replenisher potions.

That's my point and you know it.

In any case, it would have painted us in a less sympathetic light. But she made it remarkably difficult to think of the bigger picture.

"You let Harry take the fall," Cedric frowns.

"Nah, I got out of that interrogation before she moved from veritaserum to cruciatus, didn't I?" Harry says. "Besides, Umbridge made up her mind. I bet you ten galleons, right now she's raving about how I've arranged this ploy to make her look like a fool."

"As if she needs any help," Tom scoffs.

Merlin, he's taking no prisoners. Ramping up the criticism, speckling it with mockery disguised as tempting confessions, to ensure the Ministry will air things they'd normally never let see the light of day.

Harry does not envy the task of trying to make the public hate Tom more than Umbridge.

The tattoo ripples over his ribs. Harry can't resist the urge much longer. He reaches out, only to stop inches away when the snake opens its mouth in a silent hiss, flashing long fangs. He eyes them. The size of her fangs, scales and eyes paint the picture of a very large snake.

"She won't bite you," Tom says with amusement.

"I wouldn't put it past you. Impossible doesn't mean much when you're around." It hasn't escaped his notice that Tom didn't say she *can't* bite, but he strokes down the diamond patterned scales, unafraid.

Tom shivers. His skin pebbles. *She's just speaking. Passing me intel. She conveys to me whatever Regulus or Barty tell their tattoos.*

A strangled sound escapes Harry. The first impossible feat only served to lower his guard.

How? I can't hear anything.

Serpents speak in lower frequencies than parselmouths that regular human ears can't detect. Great for secrecy, not so much for two-way communication.

That means it's only an astounding rather than a colossal advantage. Harry misses the broadcast updates from Sirius and chance to analyse training with Ron like he misses a backup wand, and that was information anyone could get from watching the coverage. Regulus and Crouch would have behind the scenes access on Grindelwald's next move. They're politically savvy enough to keep Tom's finger on the pulse of public opinion, so he can tweak his approach to wind them up perfectly.

"I'll tell you a secret," Tom says quietly, but in the stillness, it seems like Hogsmeade would be able to hear him from here. "Impossibility is an illusion. It is a bar we set before ourselves, marking the unknown, the things we haven't tried, or that we failed to achieve. But that bar recedes further every year as we learn new things and rule out options that don't work. Progress is hard to see when you're keeping pace with it."

His grip slides up Harry's arm, to his holster. The holly sings at his touch. It sounds hollow until another melody joins in counterpoint. "It might be as obvious as a novel manifestation of a patronus, or as subtle as transfiguring thousands of droplets of fog into chili oil. It may take one wizard or half a dozen working together, but there is

nothing people cannot do when they are driven by curiosity or need."

The phoenix song does not immediately peter out when Tom trails over his shoulder, down his side in a mirror of the grip Harry can't make himself release, to settle comfortably in his belt loops.

"Nothing can stop the march of progress, although some try – the hoarders at the top, who fear change because they have everything to lose. So they destroy groundbreaking books and stoke discord to prevent factions finding common ground. They try to break any exceptional spirit."

A tug at his belt has Harry meeting Tom in the middle, resting their foreheads together, sharing air. Tom takes a deep breath. "The people at the top don't understand, because they have never gone without – if they take everything from us, and keep pushing, we have nothing to lose by pushing back."

A twitch under Harry's fingertips draws his attention from Tom's burning gaze to the tattoo. The snake slithers through an eye socket, vanishing briefly before reemerging through the mouth with a silent hiss.

Regulus says the Ministry cut the broadcast, Tom translates.

Well, that certainly got their attention.

Indeed. Let the Games begin.

Chapter End Notes

> Harry: You know, when normal people finish early in class, they doodle stick figures in the margins, not anarcho-rebellion symbols.
> Tom: More of them might if Binn's voice wasn't soporific. Or fewer. It's hard to tell, really.
>
> Tom's patronus was very nearly a hydra instead of a dragon. Seven heads, of course. But that would be more of a fear-of-death leaning Tom Riddle than this version.
>
> Also, fun fact: if you get hit in a certain place on your chest at a brief point in the heartbeat, it can set off ventricular fibrillation. The curse would've been called "commotio cordis" except it didn't end up working quite the same way.

Cut to the chase

Chapter Summary

Things are heating up in the arena.

Chapter Notes

New story summary: yay or nay? Let me know if it works better, romance isn't my usual genre.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alright. Ganz and Penchev should be disrupting the RADAR east of the castle by now, leaving us to handle the west. Tom removed a bunch of anchors from this area near the greenhouses, which leaves a large stretch towards the lake.”

“In the lake, too, thrown from the shore,” Tom says.

Harry nods his thanks, “Then we’re going to need a swim team.”

Cedric hooks an arm over Amelia’s shoulders. “Sounds like you’ll be running the show.”

“Yeah, I’ve got this,” she grins. It’ll be good for her to stretch her flippers.

“I may not be able to swim like a sealion but I’m a dab hand at silent casting, so I’ll worry about anything *else* lurking around while you do the hard work,” Cedric grins back.

“I think we should have two wands in the water,” Harry says. “The rest of us are out of our element in there. It’d be easy to get quickly overwhelmed.”

Fleur grimaces. “I do not do well in the water.”

“I’m alright,” Hermione says.

“She’s being modest,” Tom says. “For once.”

“I learnt from your example,” Hermione smiles in a parody of sweetness.

“I swim. The cold does not bother me,” Krum says. Harry shivers just

remembering seeing him do it for *fun* before Umbridge restricted access to the grounds.

“Okay, so we have options. Next problem,” Harry traces the RADAR boundary past the greenhouses in the other direction, where it loops around to follow the edge of the Forbidden Forest. “Krum and I can tackle the far side, since we can fly through undetected. The question is, do we do it at the same time as the lake?”

“I could come if you need a third,” Hermione points out. “Tom can swim.”

“Hmm. That’s a long way for you to run.” He and Krum could probably finish in the time it would take to get there and back, moving at a fox’s pace. “And I more worried about the swimmers needing extra hands. If you’re with us, then Tom is in the water and Fleur is alone on the bank – I don’t like it, we shouldn’t split in that case.”

“The sooner we finish, the better. The Supremacists could notice sections going dark,” Fleur says. “At least if it’s three sections at the same time, their attention will be divided.”

“Yeah, good point. How about Amelia, Cedric and Hermione on the swim team, Tom and Fleur on the bank, me and Krum on the far side?” Harry suggests. “And I could set off the RADAR near the pitch to make sure the Supremacists aren’t going to bother us right away.”

“I will do it,” Krum says. “I am faster.”

“Good point. Alright, guys, let’s get stuck into it.”

…

Smoke pulls Harry up short. It just the smell, first, but after hovering in place, he spots a faint haze. Except, it doesn’t quite look like smoke. There’s something off about the ground. An illusion, perhaps? It can’t be, it wouldn’t work through his occlumency. It’s a bit too flat, like a patio covered by a thin layer of snow. It warrants a closer look, especially if he’s going to be working nearby.

But as he flies closer, he crosses an invisible threshold, and his skin is pulled off his bones – he is abruptly human shaped and falling. There’s no time to draw his wand, there’s barely even time to think.

“Protego! Bombarda!” The curse blasts from his palm, through a frozen

sheet balanced on a pit full of spears. He falls further than expected and slams belly-first into the wooden stakes moments after they're reduced to mulch. It knocks the breath out of him, but that's familiar. He is no stranger to being too winded to move.

Get up, Potter! Snape's voice snarls at him.

Revelio, he waves his hand, unable to speak. The spell compensates for the black spots in his limited field of vision, showing two people hurrying his way. He rolls towards them until he hits a wall. If his memory serves, the sheer sides are so steep that they won't be able to see him unless they lean over the pit.

Mulch grinds against his palms as he climbs to his feet. The wall does double duty keeping him upright. He finally blinks his vision clear.

It's a serious hole, more like an open room – he wouldn't be able to reach the rim if he stretched on tiptoe. Surrounded by an anti-animagus ward. The Supremacists must be sick of animagi skirting their RADAR.

"Ah!" a vaguely familiar voice makes a sound of surprise. It isn't one he dreaded to hear. "Was that Potter?"

"Xa. Is he dead?" That voice, he certainly recognises. Ganz peers over the rim.

Harry tenses, a stunning spell at his fingertips, but it sounds like this was an accident. Still, something doesn't feel right. Behind his back, he summons his wand from his holster. "Not even close," he hedges to keep them talking.

"Fast reflexes. I didn't think anyone could cast before hitting those spikes. And what are you, anyway? Some kind of bird or insect?" Ganz wonders. "I suppose it doesn't matter."

Not at all. He has a better question. "What are you doing on this side of the castle?" Where Harry told them the alliance would be working. With a baited trap ideal for catching birds. At the furthest point from the lake, where it makes sense to send a fast animagus. And since they obviously didn't know about Harry, then – Krum.

They're trying to kill Krum.

Harry eyes the walls. Even though Viktor will see most of the trap now that it is sprung, Harry can't rely on him missing the animagus

ward – he needs to get out before he arrives. Which presents a problem. The hole is a little deeper than the wall on the obstacle course, so he knows he could reach the rim with a runup – and then get riddled with spellfire as he hauls himself out. He can't drive Ganz and Penchev off first; the hole is too deep, they could avoid every spell by simply leaning backwards. Anything that takes the ground out from under their feet would bury him.

"Don't play dumb, Potter. You know why we're here," Ganz says.

She's not feeling chatty, then. Unfortunate. The more they talk, the longer he'll have to weigh ideas. And the closer the Supremacists will get. Bellatrix won't prioritise a blip at the quidditch pitch over this steady signal. He better weigh fast. "Fine. Why betray my alliance?"

His right pocket contains instant darkness powder and a vial of acromantulas. That could work – throw the vial, cover the hole, and wait for the glass to break. Spiders *everywhere*. That'd get them moving. But it'd be one less he can deploy in the Ministry.

"We don't need you to take down the Supremacists, clearly," she shrugs. "Mazet was hardly trouble without Riddle around." Her eyes narrow. A scuff of her boots sends snow raining down on him. "And now he has joined you. I will not have him carrying Viktor Krum to another undeserved trophy."

"Oh Merlin, you're his Draco Malfoy," Harry realises. "I mean – the obsessive rivalry. You're like one of his crazy fans if a few wires got crossed."

"*Excuse* me?"

"No, no, carry on. You were just about to say how I ruined your surprise so I must die now."

Ganz hasn't taken her eyes off him. Their wands don't stray an inch. That'll change if he raises his own. And then what? Attacking directly would accomplish nothing. Her defence is too solid. He's outnumbered and will be outmanoeuvred as long as he's down here.

"You little –"

"We shouldn't kill him," Penchev says. Ganz pauses. "Black hates him."

"Another distraction, yes!" she snaps her fingers. Harry has a sinking

feeling he knows how Poulin and Ivankova died. Anything to ensure the Supremacists would split up. “We will finally have a chance at Black while she is focused on him.”

By way of torture, no doubt. He needs to get out now.

Rule one: don’t die. They aren’t aiming to kill – yet. He can use that.

“I hate to interrupt, it’s a *lovely* plan, but I’ve got places to be.”

“Too bad. This is as far as you go,” Ganz says. “It’s nothing personal. Just good strategy.”

“It really isn’t,” Harry warns. “Don’t do this. I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if you give me no choice.”

“From down there?” She raises an eyebrow. “You may move fast, but not faster than a spell. What is the saying? Fish in a barrel.”

“Sort of,” he see-saws his hand, raising it off to the side, nonthreatening. Their wands barely twitch in response. Rookie mistake. In position, he casts *protego*.

And then he moves. The shield absorbs a disarmament and momentum charm as he slams an earthen barrier across the hole, sealing himself in total darkness. He manages a disillusionment, a ground shaking explosion, and an illusion in rapid succession, before the barrier comes raining down amid Bulgarian swearing.

Harry holds perfectly still, pressed against the wall. Across from him appears to be a perfectly serviceable –

“Tunnel! Mamka mu! Cut him off!”

Look away. Come on, scan the area. Just for a second.

Penchev jumps down.

Or that works too.

A silent *petrificus totalus* hits Penchev’s back as he hits the wall and bursts the illusion. Harry is right on his heels, kicking off the ground, then a shoulder, as Penchev goes stiff as a board. He throws his hand up – *ascendio!* – and it boosts him over the rim, saving him a vulnerable scramble.

It probably saves his life.

"Homenum revelio!" Ganz only has time to locate him and shoot a piercing stunner through his battered shield before he lands. It shattered Ron's too, but the jumper is so well enchanted that it strips all of the impact. He stays standing.

"*Crucio!*"

Harry rolls beneath the jagged light. Utterly debilitating, unblockable. If that had hit him climbing out… well, it wouldn't be the last one he'd have to deal with today.

"Nikul!" Ganz barks. She already has four rocks orbiting her, ready to intercept deadly curses.

Penchev doesn't answer.

She doesn't resume the attack immediately. Reevaluating, he realises, now that she's aware she underestimated him.

That means she has doubts. Good.

Harry dispels the disillusionment. He adopts some of Tom's unhurried menace, prowling in a wide arc, wand loose in his fingers.

"Walk away, Ganz," he says slowly. He can't stutter it out in an adrenaline rush, can't waver, if this is to work.

Her eyes narrow in suspicion. Fair enough. Harry has more practice seeing through mind games than playing them, but he did practice on the undisputed master – he learnt a thing or two.

He twists his wand silently. Ganz tenses as blue light swirls by his side and rapidly condenses into a stag large enough to look her in the eye. Prongs stomps a hoof, nostrils flared.

"Tell Krum: it's a trap, go back to the others." The forest seems colder when he bounds silently away.

She'll read between the lines; he doesn't need backup.

Which is not strictly true.

Oh, he can deal with Ganz on level ground, or even both her and Penchev, because he only needs to get away. But fighting his way out won't be easy, and it'd take *time*, even though the edge of their ward can't be far. Merlin, he wishes he'd learnt more curse-breaking. He's no Fleur – it'd take him longer to break it than to run.

“Tick tock tick tock,” he drawls. “The Supremacists are coming, and I know *you* can’t face all of them outright.”

Neither can he. *Definitely* not with Ganz and Penchev also in the mix. But he doesn’t know what other traps they’ve prepared for Krum, and everyone else except Hermione risks drawing the Supremacists to them as they cross through the RADAR, and she alone won’t tip the scales.

“I won’t be facing them when they’re focused on you.”

Ganz does not need to know she is right. “You’re going to gamble on *Bellatrix* making a reasonable decision?” Harry raises his eyebrows. “Not try to kill the spare so she’ll have uninterrupted play time with me?”

Her nostrils flare. “I guess we’ll see. *Finite!*” The spell ripples out in all directions. He can’t stop it.

Bugger.

Harry flexes his fingers by his side. If he can summon her rocks out the way, just ahead of a curse – but the rocks don’t even waver in their orbits. She’s got a strong grip.

A groan echoes out of the hole.

Ganz grins in triumph. “I thought so.” Proving that, while Penchev might be the brains, she isn’t stupid. “You’re soft. You always have been. That is why you could never win.”

She is too good at intercepting to tag with a shield breaker, and her technique is too solid to overwhelm with speed. All the best plans he’d prepared for Ganz depend on having backup. Pincer movements, obstacles, anything that breaks the rules she is so accustomed to as a formal duellist. He’ll need to create his own.

“And it’s why you shouldn’t win. Half-bloods deserve strong representation. Someone who can beat the purebloods at their own game.”

“Strength isn’t the difference between us, Ganz, the difference is I don’t consider it a game.”

“You –”

“Feliculus!” Harry shouts, but the jab of his wand comes a fraction too late, synchronised with a different thought entirely. *Alcesafors.*

The rock does not shatter when Ganz intercepts the spell; that is her first clue it wasn’t a human-to-cat transfiguration. The next is less a clue than a slap in the face. The expanding rock sends her backpedalling as a moose nearly lands on her toes. The two-metre behemoth kicks out, which is the kind of initiative that Harry likes to see, but *oppugno* gives it a little more encouragement.

Even with the wall of antlers Ganz helpfully positioned directly between them, Harry doesn’t dare turn to run. He backs up, reinforcing the moose with durability charms as he goes. His skin still feels too tight when he tries to transform.

“*Diffindo,*” he flings to the side, sending Penchev ducking back into the hole. The charm hits a tree with a shudder. He reaches and pulls, “*Descendo!*” and it slams across the hole, filling the air with shards of brittle winter branches.

It leaves Harry barely enough time to block a fiery lasso and avoid a curse which blasts off an antler and just keeps going.

But there is no avoiding the glowing lattice she used in the first task. It spreads rapidly across the forest floor, and when the wide net passes his feet, he almost trips as it suddenly feels like he is wading through honey. A curse nearly takes his arm off. Dodging is too slow. He rushes to get rocks orbiting him, but that’s Ganz’s preferred defence, not his. Very clever. He is grudgingly forced to like her a little more.

“*Reparo!*” Only half the antler makes it back. It’s fixing less each time. The moose can’t walk straight anymore.

A quick glance behind shows the lattice spread as far as he can see. The problem, he realises, is that Ganz doesn’t need to defeat him either to get what she wants, she only needs to delay him.

He looks around the forest, “*Homenum revelio*.” He’s running out of time. Acromantulas seem more appealing by the second.

A shimmery bubble links the trees behind him. At her next thirty-syllable word, it starts to crystalise, a silver mirror shine spreading from the outside in, and he can’t aim through his bloody moose to interrupt her.

He groans. German conjuration is the worst. It’s very persistent and

hard to counter-transfigure when it's already so precise. His *bombarda* ricochets off into the canopy and he is forced to duck Ganz's next curse twice, from ahead and behind. A reflective shield as well as a barrier – well, that won't do.

Harry transfigures the moose to stone and Ganz cries out as her next curse does rather more damage than she'd accounted for.

He flicks his wand over his shoulder, "*Imperio!*"

A whipcrack splits the noise into silence. It echoes strangely, like a step onto a lake of black ice. He holds his breath for the fall, uncertain how much damage that little crack will do. The shield wavers. It could shred him to ribbons if it goes the wrong way.

"Protego diabolica!" Ganz adds a line of fire before the path is clear. She smirks, because she knows as well as he does that he can't bring this barrier down with unforgivables.

"Now you're annoying me." He has to change plans and she's not going to like it. Instead of blasting the mirror down, he casts at it, *"Piertotum locomotor!"*

The fractured surface ripples. A spiderweb of cracks spread from the original impact at the centre, shedding tiny pieces like fairy dust.

"What are you…?"

The precarious balance tips. A fissure opens down the centre to the ground. Two more shoot to the tree either side. The unsupported quadrants fold in on themselves before it collapses like – well, like a shattered mirror.

Or a puppet with its strings cut.

Ganz scoffs and, with the moose gone, Harry faces her efforts in earnest. He intercepts another cruciatus, braces a shield against shards of ice, and sends snaking ropes right back. She still can't touch him, even slowed by the lattice. Diabolica lashes out with her frustration, but he blasts the fiery leopards into smoke. The burning barrier spreads with an angry simmer to block him from circling around it.

"Merlin, you still don't get it. If I can't go through the fire or the ward, I'll go through *you*."

"Do it then! Oh, but you're all bluster!"

It seems he'll have to. Wards are tricky. They're a three-dimensional tapestry of one-dimensional charms and two-dimensional shields. A few weeks of a crash course is not enough to understand the endless branching possibilities, so their training focused on basic methods. Harry knows how to overload a protection ward, but short of throwing a hundred animagi at it, the technique won't work here.

An advanced practitioner like Fleur could find the right thread to pull to make it unravel, but yank the wrong thing and it'll turn into a knot. Ask Harry how he knows. He can't weave half a dozen spells without turning a fort into a house of cards. Which is– hmm.

If Ganz and Penchev anchored the ward instead of actively maintaining it – they should've, that would make sense – if he can access it, he can *add* to it.

Harry intercepts three crucios, only two from Ganz.

"Confringo!" he casts, but Penchev is ready and sends his curse careening away from the flammable splinters.

A glittering pillar steps over the fire. It reflects a thousand images of Ganz's face draining of colour. "But it isn't a statue!"

Harry tilts his head. It looks like a troll made of razor blades to him. Alright, so he isn't an artist. "You have no imagination."

"Ebasi, kill him! Just kill him!" Ganz shouts.

Which is when the orange unforgiveables turn deadly green.

The statue takes another lumbering step, clearing metres with every stride, and scatters them with a swing of its club-like arm – fourth leg? Hard to say.

Ganz's lattice now works against her, and she dodges barely fast enough to keep her head.

Explosive curses bounce off the statue in exciting new directions. Cutting curses pass through like a shovel in gravel. Vanishing charms tackle a shard at a time. Even a killing curse only blows up a few pieces, but the shockwave shatters a whole arm.

"Depulso!" Harry flings the debris out in a vicious whip, *"Reparo!"* and slams it back into the statue. Metal grinds and settles into the shoulder like new.

Penchev dives back into the hole. Smart boy.

The gold lattice unravels with a flick of Ganz's wand. He'd prefer her to ditch the fire, but it's better than nothing. He dodges her next curse with ease.

"Revelio," Harry ducks spells and shrapnel, scouring the ground and trees while she is occupied. "*Cerno, revelio.*"

Finally, a rock catches his attention. *"Accio!"*

Anchor runes – perfect. He touches his wand to the stone. *"Protego totalum."* It fizzles, but not in a useful way.

As his revelio fades, multiple warnings are fast approaching. He chalks up three more reasons to modify the ward.

"Protego totalum." Come on, he watched Fleur add Cedric's prison to their established wards several times. She even explained it once, albeit while she and Tom were taking the micky out of him and geeking out about her schemas.

He dodges a killing curse and ignores the statue as it leaps after Ganz, throwing up clods of snow and earth where it slams its fists.

"*Protego totalum."* A pulse shoots from the stone until it impacts a hemisphere near the canopy, turning it briefly visible. Brilliant. *"Salvio hexia–"*

Harry rolls under a beam of purple light.

So much for keeping the Supremacists out.

"Potter!"

He flicks a branch into the path of Bellatrix's next curse. It does not play nice, exploding in a bright flash. His skintight protego isn't strong enough – burning splinters embed down his side as he darts behind a tree, but they've fanned out and Stoeva has line of sight, shit.

"Crucio!" She tries to flush him back out.

"Accio, depulso!" More branches take the brunt of the unforgiveable. Half the fallen tree canopy barrels down on Stoeva, sending her dodging for cover.

Granted a second to breathe, he touches his wand to the stone, *"Fianto*

duri." He gets a strong whiff of burnt hair – ah, the smell of progress. Not much more now.

"I've had enough of your hiding and cowering, Potter!" Bellatrix shouts. "Four days you've been skulking about! *Bombarda!"*

It hits like a cannonball, shattering the trunk beside him. The tree starts to lean.

Harry flicks his wand and the statue changes course. He runs the moment it takes a swing at Bellatrix from halfway across the clearing, arm stretching into a glittering sword.

Ganz breaks away from her duel with Romanov, *"Avada kedavra!"*

Bellatrix sidesteps the killing curse and the sword shatters against her shield. She whirls on Ganz. "You *dare* interrupt me!"

Harry sprints, drops, and skids. He slides into the hole as a curse sails over the tree trunk, and lands on something squishy, which does less to break his fall than roll his ankles.

"Avada ke–"

"Langlock." His spell hits Penchev point blank as a swift kick sends his wand skittering away, and Penchev skittering after it, clutching his wrist. Fewer syllables for the win.

Either another tree or the statue falls with an earthshaking thud.

"Repello inimicum," Harry casts on the anchor stone. He can practically hear the wards groaning under the pressure. That should do it.

He throws the stone straight up through a fork in the branches, aims high, casts *"Reducto!"* and braces under the strongest protego he can muster.

The stone shatters. The unbalanced wards can't stand on their own. All that energy in the tangled knot unravels, pulls taught, then snaps in spectacular fashion.

The shockwave embeds Harry's shield a few inches into the dirt and debris. Penchev, well – it sucks to be Penchev. Hope he knows how to fix ribs, because if they're not broken now, they might be soon. The trunk overhead creaks and groans, split by the force. Harry doesn't wait for it to fall – his skin is loose, free.

He transforms and rockets out of the hole, past the champions laying stunned. It looks like Ganz took a rock to the face and Stoeva got thrown several metres, wheezing with the breath knocked out of her. Bellatrix, the furthest from the epicentre, is already rolling over. So is the statue, one piece at a time, slowly going from a silver smear over the ground into clumps and then piles.

Yeah, have fun with that.

Bellatrix catches sight of him. Her eyes widen, “You! You’re not a deer!”

Oh well, now she knows Tom lied. At least Harry didn’t accidentally kill her, Tom can’t be too cranky.

She scrambles for her wand. Time to go. He weaves through the trees, her curses missing by miles.

“Catch her!” Bellatrix shouts – it sounds like Ganz is making a run for it.

Someone much slower crashes through the brush behind him. He flips to fly backwards for a moment and, sure enough, Bellatrix is making a frankly optimistic attempt at pursuit. He gaps her between one second and the next.

But she has barely disappeared from view when a silver net closes around him, conjured from thin air. It’s too close and he’s flying too fast to pull up, but he doesn’t have to. It might catch a falcon or a sparrow or even a snitch, but not a snitch-sized bird that is mostly fluff by volume.

He tucks in his wings and feet. The wire scrapes his shoulders, squishes his feathers into his sides, igniting the shrapnel wounds in a way flying hadn’t.

He pops out the other side gasping and spins a quick circle. It doesn’t seem like the kind of magic that can be set to a triggered trap, but it must be, because the only wands left in the arena are at the lake or behind him.

A blue flash of *arresto momentum* comes from entirely the wrong direction. He rolls around it.

“Ugh!” Bellatrix shrieks, from far too close. “You aren’t going to get away this time!”

"Reparifarge animagi!" Stoeva casts.

Nope, Harry wants no part in whatever is going on – he shoots straight up, faster than the swirling firestorm that tries to suck him back down. The vortex follows him through the canopy, but in the open air it runs out of fuel long before he runs out of room.

A moment later, red wand sparks break through the snow-capped trees, no more than a hundred metres away, stark against the background of the lake.

It has to be the alliance. No, it has to be *Tom*, because no one else is crazy or confident enough to send up a flare in the arena. But Harry hesitates. He was wrong once already, in ways that don't make sense. Something's going on here.

He drifts away, if only to get out of the acrid smoke.

Magic wraps around him like a hook. *Uh oh,* he thinks, before it yanks him toward the sparks, leaving his stomach behind. Flying won't get him out of it. Transforming would, because it feels like a summoning charm and to work at such a distance it would have to be specific. Or he can ride it out and switch at the last moment to slam his full weight into them. That's the plan, until he sees who he'd be bowling over. He fluffs up to brace for impact.

Tom's hands close around him, moving away to break his fall.

Harry lays in the dark for a moment, only slightly winded. Warm. Safe.

The fingers open a crack. Tom stares at him cradled in his hands, a curious look on his face. His thumb briefly strokes the downy feathers below his eye. Harry rolls into it chirping. The thumb snags on a matted spot. Tom frowns. His fingers come away streaked with blood.

He unceremoniously transfers Harry to one hand and draws his wand. *"Vreite."* The frown deepens at the diagnosis. "Are you in shock? No. Then why aren't you in more pain?" he asks, out of breath.

Adrenaline, probably. It'd take more to go into shock. The thought doesn't reassure Tom; he can't connect with his animal mind well enough.

"Hell of a drug," Tom mutters.

Harry narrows his eyes. Either he is getting better with practice, or they just think alike. Harry can't feel the link – if it's there, it's weak.

He spies sweat on Tom's hairline, despite the snow. He's been running, Harry realises. He never runs.

"Splinters? *Evanesco. Episkey.* You transformed injured, didn't you. For Merlin's sake, at your size they're gashes. *Vulnera sanentur."* Strung together, the syllables turn into a song. The dull throbbing eases, following the rhythm of the spell.

Harry clacks his beak. *Will you let me up now, Madam Pomfrey?*

"I can tell you're being a smartarse."

No points for that one. I'm conscious and breathing.

"Done."

Harry transforms in his hands. His arms naturally settle to mirror Tom's around his waist. "Good catch. Ever considered playing quidditch?" His brain catches up with his mouth, "Never mind – they're coming."

Tom dives into his mind to find exactly who and where and why. He bares his teeth. "Let them. I warned them what will happen if they touch you."

Harry's gut clenches. They're more dangerous than usual. *No, something's wrong. Where are the others?*

Where I left them. Probably.

You don't know? Merlin, of course you don't. Harry grabs his hand and starts running. Tom huffs. It takes some solid tugging to get him moving as fast as the footprints in the snow prove he can. *A little urgency or I'll leave you behind.*

That does it. He keeps pace easily when properly motivated.

Harry looks over his shoulder, neck prickling. *I don't know what happened. It was almost like –*

They're in two places at once? Tom asks intently.

Exactly.

That's what Regulus said. But he couldn't be sure it wasn't edited out of sequence.

Disapparition? One moment she was behind me, the next ahead. I didn't see brooms.

The castle wards wouldn't allow apparition exemptions. Did she look different the second time, with the net?

Not that I noticed.

Damn.

Why?

Because this means we need to steal a time turner, and we don't know which version is carrying it.

Harry almost pitches headfirst into the snow. The implications are far more important than whatever is in front of his feet, and second only to the vicious satisfaction curling around his mind.

Merlin's balls. One problem at a time. He spells their footprints away and keeps running.

…

"Harry!" Hermione breaks ahead of the others.

"Good luck," Tom murmurs, taking a large step back.

Harry glares at him before the world is smothered by curly hair. He knows better than to open his mouth or inhale before Hermione releases him. Thankfully she does before he passes out.

"What happened? Viktor said you spotted a trap? Whose trap? Where?"

"Ganz and Penchev. An anti-animagus net set up for birds."

"You clod!" she shoves him, then pulls him into another desperate hug. "We didn't know if you meant we were walking into a trap or you were!"

"Oh, shit," he winces at Krum. "Sorry. I didn't think about how it'd sound. And I was trying to bluff Ganz into leaving me alone."

Krum snorts.

“That’s how well it went, yeah.”

“When you didn’t show up–” Hermione cuts off with a huff. “Why didn’t you say you were in trouble?”

“Well, I was *in* the trap at the time.”

“Help is a four-letter word, don’t tell me you were too busy!”

“Okay, so don’t freak out –”

“Well, I am now!”

“– but the Supremacists showed up too.”

“Harry!”

“I swear I’m okay.”

“Are you *sure*?” Hermione asks as she runs her own diagnostics.

“Yeah. Maybe we could return home–? Ow, retract your claws woman, I’m not trying to do a runner! Merlin. Fleur, could you make us a little more protected and a lot more hidden, please? *Right now*.”

He breathes easier when Fleur finishes a minute later.

“I only turned an ankle and got a few splinters. Already fixed.” Which is why she doesn’t need to know exactly how much damage those splinters did.

“Mhmm.” Hermione isn’t convinced for some reason. She rolls up his sleeves, frowning.

Cedric tries not to laugh at his predicament. He does not appear to be trying very hard.

Harry settles in to endure the prodding with good grace. It’s the least he can do after worrying them. “So I was flying along, and I spotted something a little *off*. In hindsight, it was just off enough to make me take a closer look.”

The story passes the time. Amelia is a sympathetic audience, so she is now his favourite. Just knowing she’s listening makes it easier to focus on the light-hearted bits.

“Fleur, you’ll love this – I managed to be bad enough at warding that I circled back around to something useful.”

Fleur eyes him. “You worry me whenever you say things like that.”

Amelia giggles. He raises an eyebrow, setting her off harder.

“Hear me out. So I found the runestone where they anchored the anti-animagus ward, right?”

Fleur has her head in her hands by the end. “I don’t know it teaching you more will let you live longer or if it will be the last thing I do.”

“No reason it can’t be both,” Cedric teases.

“Rude,” Harry sniffs. “Hermione, I got to use McGonagall’s animation spell! She’s right, it is fun.”

“Well, I’m glad you were enjoying yourself,” she says waspishly. “We had no idea what was going on. Or whether it was safe for us to move or send a message back or go after you. Or how we would even find you, since by that point Tom was long gone –”

“Wait, he left *before* Krum returned?” His brow pinches, he wonders aloud, “How did he even know I was in trouble?”

“Haven’t the slightest. He took off without a word.”

Legilimency? Surely not at that distance – no, the tattoo! Merlin, Regulus didn’t message to warn him about a possible time turner, the warning was about the ambush, about *Harry*. And this is not new. He feels struck by lightning. No wonder Tom could pop up whenever he was alone, anywhere in the castle.

How long has Regulus been throwing you in my path? Or me in yours?

No reply. That’s odd. He looks over, frowning.

“Hey, where’s Tom? Oh no.” The question hasn’t fully formed before he knows, deep in his gut. “He’s gone after them.”

His wand spins in his palm. It seems an eon before it stops, pointing west.

“Oh for – Harry!” The shout trails off into the distance as he drives his wings for all they’re worth.

Would he pursue the Supremacists or the other two? Probably Ganz and Penchev; their deaths would have no bearing on his plans. They weren't far, but they must be small animagi if they've been rigging traps around the Supremacist fort for a week, so Tom probably hasn't had time to track them down yet. But if he does find them, he won't make it quick. He might make a point about limiting himself to classical duelling to beat Ganz in her element. He could get carried away enjoying the fight, and while he's playing, the Supremacists could catch up. They could've found Ganz first. There might be five or six of them.

Eery whooping reaches him through the wind, sending chills down his spine. Hyenas are not standard duelling fair – Tom isn't messing around. He isn't having fun. A bad sign. Harry flings himself past trees with reckless speed. First the sound, then rapid flashes of spell fire light his path.

Around the next copse of trees, Ganz is surrounded. Hyenas scramble over a pile of their fallen copies to reach her. She spins, wide-eyed, cutting swathes through their ranks. "*Glacius, diffindo, bombarda!*"

Harry hits the ground in a rush, jarring his knees.

Ganz pales but she can't spare a curse for him. She doesn't even have enough breathing room to curse Tom. "*Evanesco, reducto!*"

"*Homenum revelio*." Harry keeps one eye on her and the other on their surroundings. A few more thorough spells don't turn up any Supremacists or animagi, except for a falcon making his way rapidly towards them.

Tom doesn't relent in his barrage of curses long enough to repair the hyenas. The broken transfigurations are hampering her movement well enough. She can't dodge and she can barely block.

They can all see how this ends.

"*Accio!*" she tries to delay the inevitable, summoning more shields.

Ganz has nowhere to go when a silent *confringo* shatters her last two rocks and a wave of Tom's hand banishes the replacements before they reach her.

Tom finally speaks. "*Avada kedavra.*"

Green light envelops her, leaving a white streak of an afterimage in

the corner of Harry's eye long after she's gone.

"*Evanesco*." The hyenas vanish. Tom straightens his jacket and holsters his wand.

Harry bites back a shout for that alone. He keeps scanning the forest and the skies as Krum lands on the churned, scorched earth.

"Where's Penchev?" Harry asks because, unlike *some people*, he has priorities.

"Already dealt with. Heron animagus. Thought I wouldn't notice." Tom doesn't look thrilled or satisfied or even particularly interested. Nothing that would spur him into rash action.

It throws Harry for a loop. He lowers his wand, heart starting to slow, releasing the tension coiling his muscles. If Tom isn't acting rashly, then he must have a reason.

Tom tilts his head.

Harry brushes aside the legilimency with a terse, "Not right now." But not before Tom bumps into several spikey emotions and recoils. Harry winces in sympathy. "Sorry. I'm trying not to take it out on you."

His brow furrows into the closest expression of concern that Harry has seen. "What's wrong? You don't care that I killed them."

"I *care* about you haring off on a vengeful rampage when all I want is you *safe*," Harry says, a growl sneaking past his defences. He takes a deep breath. The line between fear and anger is razor thin and he doesn't want to stray across it. "I can see that I assumed wrong – you have a reason, whatever it is – but I'm still going to need a minute to wind down before I can look at you without yelling." Tom is staring, eyes seeking answers in every angle of Harry's body, but Harry can't meet his gaze. He scrubs a hand down his face and turns to Krum, "Did you see anything heading our way?"

"No," Krum answers, scrutinising the distance between them. He doesn't stow his wand.

Shame, Harry could've used the outlet. His fear isn't easing, merely changing from fight-or-flight to bone deep suspicion, the kind that weighs on the soul. Did Tom downplay his anger and mask his intentions to get a head start, because he knew Harry would object? He doesn't want to jump to conclusions, but he can't seem to stop

speculation filling the void. He needs to hear Tom's side now, before he works himself up again. He can ask without screaming at least.

"Why did you sneak off?"

"Sneak? I didn't sneak. I simply went alone." Tom frowns, fingers tapping a restless rhythm. "I didn't think you'd want to help? No, I'm sure of it. You don't like hurting people, and if you wanted to kill them you could've earlier. And anyone else would just get in my way." He pauses, glancing at Krum, "Maybe not him, but backup was unnecessary, in any case. Frankly, Harry, I'll be offended if you think they could've scratched me."

"There's more than those two." Maybe six Supremacists, including two Bellatrixes who got their blood up in a fight with no payoff, overseen by the Ministry with their thumb on the scales. At some point today, Harry would like a moment to process how dangerous that is.

"Still."

Merlin, he's so confident. It should be infuriating, but he has the skill to back it up, so it makes Harry's blood boil in a very different way. Tom would probably do far more than merely survive – the problem is he *knows* it. It leaves the distinct possibility of rational bad ideas. Harry can't rely on Tom's self-preservation or commitment to the plan holding him back. If a time turner is what he has been waiting for, the Supremacists might've just outlived their usefulness. Except – no, if Bellatrix will use the time turner she hasn't necessarily been given it yet. Does that matter? Merlin, this is confusing.

"If I blink, are you going to hunt them down next?"

"No," Tom says. "I won't fight them without you."

Harry's shoulders sag as if a physical weight is lifted. Tom reacts like he's taken the burden off him as well.

"Come on then, before they show up for round two," Harry says. They aren't in the RADAR zone, but it won't stop the Supremacists hunting them down the old-fashioned way. The hyenas were not subtle.

Tom keeps pace without complaining, but then again, this time they aren't running. Krum falls in behind them, wand out in a rear guard, which strikes Harry as a little odd, but he supposes he wouldn't be too keen to scout with bird traps around. Doesn't explain why he's watching them more than the forest, though.

“For the record,” Harry says. “Even if I don’t want to take part, I still want be there in case you need me.”

“Even when you don’t know the reason?”

“Even if I disagree with the reason.” Which reminds him, he is curious. “If it wasn’t revenge, then why?”

“It was necessary to proactively remove the threat.”

Harry frowns.

Tom pauses. Fingers restart their agitated tapping. “You’re still upset. Why?”

Krum muffles an incredulous noise, and Harry bites back the same. He takes a moment to remind himself that Tom might not be questioning his feelings, but what is causing them. He isn’t half as good at reading people without legilimency. If he is just confused, jumping down his throat isn’t going to help.

“I don’t like the idea of people getting hurt because of me.”

“Yes. Justice, not revenge. I remember. But that wasn’t your only acceptable condition. You didn’t disagree when I said he needs to die, just when I offered to make him suffer first.”

“Davies?” Krum wonders, frowning in confusion.

No, he’s talking about Pettigrew. “Oh, you don’t see the difference,” Harry realises.

“There isn’t one. Threats need to be removed.”

Pettigrew is *not at all* the same as Ganz and Penchev – to Harry, at least, even if both were betrayals. He drops his occlumency, but that alone won’t clarify the issue. Especially because it takes a moment to clear his imagination of a cat gifting him a mouse, puzzled as to why the offering is poorly received whether it is dead or alive. Harry knows a long debate when he sees one, and this one will require reference material and a library visit. For now, he can narrow down a facet that Tom will understand. Harry certainly shouldn’t have to tell him why the other champions are almost irrelevant to their survival at this point.

“They were harmless.”

“They were *clever*,” Tom refutes. “Penchev, especially. An effective team of brawn and brains, good at exploiting weaknesses. Useful when they were keeping the Supremacists and the gamemakers entertained, but not if they were determined to be a hinderance.”

You know that’s not what I meant. We’re leaving. They didn’t have to die.

They didn’t know that. Tom gives a mental shrug.

Harry sucks in a deep breath. *If I hadn’t written the note, it would’ve taken them longer to figure out you’d joined us. Even if it was just a few days…*

You don’t know if that’s why they changed targets. They could’ve planned to turn on you long ago.

That line of reasoning manages to find an anchor in the swirling guilt. Maybe Harry set them off, maybe not. But no matter why they attacked, Tom didn’t retaliate because of Harry’s mistake. He can square that with his conscience, for now, without feeling like he’s teetering on a precarious slope.

Legilimency tendrils find the prickles receding and settle more comfortably into the warmth.

“They were not harmless,” Tom reiterates, deadly serious. “Their first trap didn’t hurt Romanov either. Their second attempt almost killed him.”

“I’m a little better than Romanov.” *Our spell is practically finished. We could’ve avoided more traps for a day or two.*

That is not a chance I’m willing to take. “Oh yes, I’m sure they learnt better than to go after you again. They did for me and Bellatrix. After their first attempt lost the element of surprise, they shifted targets to the weakest instead. Maybe they’d have gone after Bones.” *And that would’ve hurt you far more.*

Icicles stab through Harry’s joints and pin his lungs to his spine. For a moment he thinks the dementors are back. Tom is beside him in an instant, warm hand supporting him before he stumbles, caught between warring impulses. A vicious part wants to go back and make sure they’re dead.

He slides an arm around Tom’s waist, squeezing tightly before they must part to pick their way down a gully.

“They would’ve been back. They were relentless in a way that is quite admirable, really,” Tom says. “They’d find our base, if they hadn’t already by following one of their letters, and start trying to pick us off.” He shrugs. “Or perhaps they’d get the Supremacists to do it – lure them to our camp, let the two big alliances spend their strength against each other, and then kill the survivors.”

“Okay, we had to do something,” Harry concedes. The vicious thing purrs until he bops it on the nose. “But there are many ways to neutralise threats before killing them. Hell, I already muted Penchev.”

“Agree to disagree.”

“On the necessity of murder? Why am I not surprised.”

“It was only chance that their trap did not kill Krum.”

Harry opens his mouth. Closes it. He spins around to face Krum’s expectant eyebrow. A tug on his elbow stops him walking into a bush. “You wouldn’t be flying towards the ground at Wronski feint speeds so the impact is easily survivable without wandless spells, but I may have forgotten to mention the pit was full of sharp wooden stakes. What do you reckon?”

The damage a splintered racing broom can do in a crash makes it into the quidditch magazines sometimes. He knows its nasty – anything that can put a wizard on the bench for the rest of the season is serious – but he’s not the professional.

“It would not be pretty,” is the expert verdict.

“Log,” Tom warns. Harry turns to trip over it forwards instead. “Ganz wouldn’t have stopped for a chat with him. He wouldn’t have made it out of the hole.”

“Alright, you’ve got me there,” Harry says.

“We should have taken them together,” Krum adds.

“Ideally,” Tom agrees. “Since we’re airing grievances…” he stops, drawing Harry’s full attention. “You are not the only one who has strong feelings about your partner facing danger alone.”

It is only then that Harry notices the tight lines around his eyes. His stomach lurches. “I’m sorry I worried you. But I can’t promise people won’t try to kill me.” *And there’s a difference between running into*

trouble and seeking it out alone.

Tom catches the thought and glares. “You could’ve called for help. You chose not to.”

“I would’ve been long gone by the time everyone arrived.”

“That’s an excuse. You didn’t know that when you told the only backup capable of quickly reaching you to turn around.” His gaze is uncompromising. “You didn’t want us to pass through the RADAR, to put us at moderate risk, so you shouldered a much higher risk yourself. It is a frustrating instinct.”

Harry gapes. He wants to deny it, but not because it’s untrue. A glance at Krum confirms he noticed as well and isn’t thrilled.

“You’re thinking about the others even now. Worring how they’ll cope without us if they’re attacked.”

Harry hadn’t noticed, but it flares as soon as he realises it’s there. His breathing speeds up. “We did sort of abandon them.”

“They’ll be fine.”

“We could’ve led the Supremacists right there.”

“We took a circuitous route. And I can see in your memories that Delacour raised wards.”

Tom steps in until their foreheads touch. As arms wrap around his back, Harry slides a hand under scale armour, curling fingers into the familiar weave of his jumper.

“You do not trust people to keep themselves safe,” Tom murmurs. *You learned too young that no one is invulnerable, no matter how capable. Again and again, you lost the people who would’ve protected you. It is not unreasonable to fear losing more. But do not let that fear rule your better judgement.*

It splits him open to be seen so deeply. Only Tom’s arms hold the pieces together. Lips brush moisture from the corner of his eye before it freezes. “You are frighteningly good at evaluating what people can handle – let them handle it. Respect requires a degree of trust, or it is neither.”

Fuck.

“You’re right.” Harry knows he is. He’s overreacting, but he can’t turn it off. He tries closing his eyes, tries to slow his breathing, but be can’t even make the worry go back to lurking in his subconscious.

You’d know if they’re attacked? Harry has to check.

Yes, Tom says patiently. *But would that change the outcome? Think about it, Harry. Is there anything we’ve faced that they wouldn’t be able to hold out against until we meander over?*

He unshackles the catastrophic scenarios to run rampant through his imagination. Only the impossible ones cross the point of no return – if they lost their nerve, if they split up, if they turned on each other. Anything else, Fleur’s wards would hold. Hermione, Cedric and Amelia wouldn’t be sitting idly by. Even against too many Supremacists, they’d endure a while.

His heartrate slows enough that blood isn’t rushing in his ears.

Good. Tom nudges memories of the first task to the surface. Harry couldn’t help them fight, he despised it, but it turned out fine. *They are perfectly capable alone. They are an even better team, so be part of it. Let reliance go both ways.*

Harry holds on so tight it must hurt, but Tom only matches his grip. Harry wants to be better. He wants to promise to call for help next time, but his tongue won’t move.

Just try. Each time you feel a particularly heroic urge, think twice. Decide if it is the best idea, Tom says. Harry can scarcely tell whether the words are whispered or in his head. He’s surrounded by the sea, rocking on the waves. *I will do the same – I will try not to tackle our enemies without your input. I will not assume I already know what you want.*

A guarantee feels impossible, but effort is something Harry finds he wants to make, for Tom. The relief is overwhelming.

I’ll try, Harry promises. He just has to remember that neither of them fights alone. He wants that more than anything. His knees feel steady again, but he doesn’t push back to stand on his own just yet – not without swaying forward into Tom’s lips, sliding a hand to squeeze the back of his neck. *Thank you.*

For you, anytime. Whatever else Tom might say is cut off as his eyes go half lidded. He trails the kiss across Harry’s temple before regaining

his focus.

A throat clears. Krum is pointedly not looking at them. He has stowed his wand.

Tom rolls his eyes and starts walking. He leaves the arm curled around Harry's shoulders. When Harry darts a look backwards, a long finger flicks up from his shoulder to trace his jaw. "Would you watch where you're going?"

"As if you'd let me fall."

Tom clears his throat, cheeks slightly pink. "You don't need to fuss. Krum is following as closely as Eurydice."

"As a what?"

"Who, rather. Orpheus and Eurydice?"

Harry's blank look gets a long-suffering sigh that isn't fooling anyone.

"Eurydice died soon after they were married. Orpheus journeyed to the underworld to petition Hades and Persephone to visit her. His music so moved the gods that they granted them a chance for her to leave. Is this ringing any bells?"

"Nah. You might've had more luck if you asked me a week before OWLs," Harry says, unrepentant. He can't regret anything that puts a bounce in Tom's step.

"Well, Hades cut a deal. If Orpheus made it out of the underworld without looking back to see if Eurydice was following him, she'd live. He couldn't hear her footsteps. He didn't trust Hades or Eurydice. He looked back and watched her return to the underworld forever. There are interesting parallels across the world, actually, with the Japanese deities Izanagi and Izanami."

Harry absorbs every word he says, just so he can pick apart his arguments for the rest of the trek.

It isn't long before they cross the soggy transition from autumn to summer. For the second time today, Harry thinks it is an experience that does not bare repeating on foot.

The heat is stifling under all their layers until they leave the trees and the wind races up to meet them, chilled from the lake. Magic can

mimic the temperature but not the long summer days. At this time of year, it's already dipping to the mountains.

Harry only relaxes when he sees his friends where he left them.

"You're back! Look, I caught a peluda!" Amelia runs over, holding up a flask.

He blinks to bring it (and his nose) into focus. The normally house-sized creature is now mouse-sized. Even the poison-tipped quills lining its back look like fur in miniature, and the long scaley tail is quite like a rodent. If you ignore the stocky webbed feet. And the tiny shark mouth doing its level best to gnaw her finger through the glass.

He ruthlessly quashes instinctive alarm to make room for pride. "Wow, that's brilliant!" Obviously, they managed just fine. More than fine, if the gamemakers couldn't activate its portkey before they caught it.

Even Tom hums. "Indeed."

Hermione, on the other hand, does *not* seem impressed – with Harry and Tom, specifically.

Tom takes one look at the greeting party and rolls his eyes. He kisses Harry's cheek, either in good luck or good riddance. *Don't waste too much time. We're going to need the element of surprise soon,* he says, before heading toward the shore, picking out a rune stone from hundreds of indistinguishable pebbles.

"Keep an eye on him, won't you Viktor?" Hermione shoots Krum a significant look.

"I do not think we have anything to worry about."

"Humour me."

He doesn't try to convince her. "You'll see," he reasons. He claps Harry's shoulder in silent support before jogging to catch up.

It leaves Hermione, Fleur and Cedric in an arc, Amelia halfway between them and Riddle, likely also out of earshot. Harry would rather be with her and the shark-mouse. He feels like he walked in on a committee meeting.

Best get it over with. "Alright, what are you up to?"

“Look, Harry, we’re just a bit concerned. Tom, well, he’s not particularly *nice*,” Hermione says delicately.

Harry snorts. “You don’t have to beat *that* far around the bush.”

“Alright, fine. He’s terrifying and unnerving and we don’t think it’s safe to be alone with him.”

Well, damn. They mean well, and they’re not stupid, but that might make it harder. However difficult it may be, it’s better to clear the air before it festers, because none of these people are leaving his life if he has anything to say about it. “Go on then.”

“He’s dangerous.”

Harry stares. “…Yes?”

“Not only because he’s so skilled. Ganz and Penchev are dead – I’m sure it was him.” Taking his complete lack of surprise as confirmation, she wrings her hands. “Then he has killed three people without blinking. I don’t think he’s at all remorseful.”

“He isn’t.” Tom regrets tactical mistakes, unforeseen consequences, and little else. The only part of the day he’d undo is making Harry think he deliberately went behind his back.

Hermione and Fleur exchange a bewildered look with Cedric. Apparently, he isn’t following the script. He waits patiently while they muster their arguments – for a few seconds, until it occurs to him that he can summon rune stones within the range of his detection spells. There are three in his pocket before the committee reaches a consensus on the path forward.

“Are you not concerned that he could hurt you?” Fleur asks. “To snap so easily, and go so far…”

“He didn’t snap,” Harry says. “I thought so too, but it wasn’t emotional, it was a deliberate reaction to a threat. An overreaction, if you ask me.”

“So it was entirely premeditated. As if that makes it better,” Hermione says. “He’s as bad as Bellatrix.”

Harry raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, that was unfair,” she admits.

He nods. “Bellatrix is a sadist – the pain is the point. He doesn’t go out of his way to hurt people.”

“He doesn’t go out of his way to avoid it, either,” Cedric says.

“*That’s* fair.”

There they go again, thrown for another loop. As if Harry doesn’t know that he’s dealing with a person who calculates whether cursing someone will solve or create more problems. He has fallen afoul of those sums enough times to know that Tom favours stinging hexes over colour-changing charms when he wants to prove a point.

His friends don’t recover after a second, so he wonders off after more runes. They’ll catch up, no doubt with the conclusion that if he recognises the potential then he isn’t taking it seriously enough. Harry is far more concerned with the time turner. Now *that* is a problem worth fretting over, but it’s certainly not something to discuss in the open. Not if it’s part of the plan. Tom got Barty and Regulus to redirect his sponsorships behind Bellatrix for a reason, and if his satisfaction is any indication, it paid off with interest. But to what end?

Spray from the whitecaps freckles his glasses as the wind picks up further. It makes the water look darker, and somehow deeper, as if anything lurking there could creep right up to the shore without being detected.

He tenses when footsteps crunch behind him.

“Let’s say you’re right. But if he’ll go as far as murder with a level head, what’s to stop him doing worse in the heat of the moment?” Hermione challenges.

Harry considers it, even though it seems absurd – Tom’s anger is cold, analytical, not volatile. “I can’t think of a single thing that hurting us would achieve.”

“That’s all?” she asks, incredulous. “Just that it’s not necessary?”

“That’s *everything*. Especially with someone so pragmatic.” He frowns, summoning another stone. “He doesn’t need to and he doesn’t want to. What else is there? It’d just be a huge step away from what he *does* want.”

“Most of the time, certainly. I’m not saying he’s harbouring some sort

of secret resentment for you, or even the rest of us. But he *really* isn't known for his boundless patience. You remember the Cliffs of Dover?" she shakes her head with a wince. "Just because Myrtle kept interrupting our guide. Some of us might've imagined shoving her, but no one else would've *done* it. If he gets annoyed, angry, jealous – everyone does sometimes – it'd only take a split second."

Harry doesn't know how they'd hold off duelling or debating for long enough to build up that much frustration.

"Afterwards, the excuses come out," Fleur says grimly. "That's when they turn it on you. When he says you're making him feel neglected, so he has to sabotage your friendships or career to get more of your time."

"When you make him lose his temper and he just gets carried away," Hermione continues.

Harry scrunches his nose. That could've been a quote from Ginny's ex. Such rubbish. The only word you can say to make someone hurt you is imperio.

"Or," her serious face gets downright grim, "when he has to hurt the people you care about because it's the only punishment that could keep you in line."

A bolt goes through his spine. "That will not happen."

The tether in his mind flares the moment it registers distress. Tom assesses that he isn't in danger in an instant. *Want help?*

Got it covered.

Have fun.

Yeah, tonnes.

With that, Harry pushes him to a different part of his mind, out of his surface thoughts. His friends clearly want the discussion to be private if they've got Amelia as a lookout and Krum on distraction duty. For a given value of private, with omnioculars.

"Riddle would move heaven and earth for you, but the rest of us – he only cares about us if we're useful to him," Cedric grimaces. It goes loudly unsaid that their utility is much reduced since solving the trickiest parts of the spell. No wonder they're worried. They don't

know Tom thinks he and Harry will need the alliance as backup against Grindelwald.

But even so. Harry shakes his head vehemently. “He is not going to use you as leverage over me. It’s not possible for me to misunderstand him that badly with how long I’ve spent in his head.”

It wouldn’t make sense. It would be the fastest way to destroy the connection that Tom wanted badly enough to arrange a coup seven years ahead of schedule. To see it as anything but the point of no return, Tom would have to go from the most logical man in the world to the most delusional, and unstable to boot. It would take a compete mental breakdown.

Harry takes a breath. He forces his fist to unclench. “The only way he’d hurt you is indirectly, by not helping you. And the only reason he’d do *that*, is if he prioritised something else.” Like Harry himself. It’s a worrying possibility.

“You really believe that,” Cedric realises, watching him carefully. His shoulders relax a little, but he still doesn’t look entirely satisfied. “You’re sure he won’t hurt you. Or any of us.”

“Why are you so sure that he will? Specifically,” Harry adds. His thrumming temples promise a headache. Speculation is getting them nowhere. Unless they’re dancing around the topic for a reason. He frowns. “Has he done something to you? Said something? Poked fun?”

Harry hasn’t seen anything of the sort. Certainly, Tom hasn’t exerted any effort to be particularly pleasing since training. None of them have. There’s a kind of respect in that candid honesty, far more so than in flattery. But if Tom is not just intimidating, but *deliberately* intimidating them, that’s a problem.

“Non, it is mainly how he treats you that concerns us,” Fleur says.

“Oh, is that all.”

“Is that all,” Hermione groans. “Look, if it was just the sparring, I wouldn’t worry. We’re not saying it’s cruel to beat the stuffing out of each other, because that seems to work for both of you.”

Harry snorts. At least they’ve got the basics right.

“And we agree that he seems to hold you in great respect,” she continues. “But he’s possessive. Controlling. Secretive. He’s constantly

monitoring you like he doesn't trust you at all."

But they certainly aren't right about all of it. Harry scrubs a hand down his face. Lack of trust, Merlin. Harry trusts him as much as he trusts anyone, and Tom – he's given Harry enough to *ruin* him. But of course, they don't know that.

"He trusts me with his secrets. You can scratch the last two off your list."

"Really."

"Without a shadow of a doubt," Harry says. "Take it or leave it, you're not getting proof."

"No details, of course, I wouldn't expect you to share anything he said in confidence," Cedric holds up his hands. "But is it conditional on leaving your mind open? Harry, that's not trust."

"No. I know enough occlumency to hide things from him. He tells me anyway."

Eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"That's *action*, not just empty words," Cedric murmurs to Fleur.

"We keep the link open most of the time because we like it that way. Tom more than me, maybe, but he doesn't hassle me when I close it."

A hint of cautious optimism makes it onto Hermione's face. "That's a good sign."

"I wouldn't call him possessive or controlling either. More like protective and endlessly curious. It looks dodgy because you only see half of what's going on between us." And part of that, Tom is performing for the omnioculars, winding people up for strategic reasons. Which, honestly, is hard to distinguish from him winding people up for fun. "If he was controlling, I reckon he'd do something about this conversation. Or at the very least eavesdrop. He knows we're talking about him."

Tom could easily listen through Cedric's mind without anyone noticing. He won't. Harry doesn't even need to check. He said he's got it covered, so Tom will consider it covered.

"He knows *what*?" Fleur hisses. Their alarm is nothing less than

expected. If Tom was the kind of wanker to monitor his thoughts to ensure they're favourable, warnings that undermine his influence could provoke extreme measures to reassert control. Or, more likely, they'd never have this conversation because Tom would've been ten steps ahead, sucking up to them from the get-go.

The thing is, Tom is *precisely* that kind of wanker. He manipulates as a matter of course. But there is no need for him to compete with Harry's friends for influence, because Harry is not easily swayed by either of them.

"He isn't listening," Harry repeats, "because I don't want him to, and because he knows I'll make up my own mind. I think you've seriously underestimated what it means for him to respect me."

"Does he respect you as a person, though, or as a trophy to enhance his own image?" Hermione wonders. "He squabbled over you with the Supremacists like a piece of meat."

"I still think Riddle was threatening them to protect Harry," Cedric tells her. Faced with her gimlet stare, he concedes, "Not that it couldn't also be possessive."

"I think it was possessive. He followed through. He killed people for trying to take something he sees as *his*," Fleur says.

"He killed them for me, to protect *you*," Harry tells them. She blinks, startled. "If you want to boil it down, then you're useful to him alive because that's an easy way to keep me happy."

"Is it weird I find that comforting?" Cedric murmurs.

Harry shrugs. "I do."

"Is that why…" Fleur might be having a revelation. "He is not so greedy for your time that he pushes us out. It is not what I expected. Yes, possessive is the wrong word."

"Protective, though?" Hermione asks. "He stood by while Bellatrix cast killing curses through inferi."

The problem with other people putting themselves in Riddle's shoes, Harry realises, is that the boots really don't fit. And now he has to think of a nice way to say that most people register at about the same danger level as a mosquito to Tom, and he holds Harry to the same standard.

Opening that can of worms as little as possible, he says simply, “I didn’t need help.”

“He came running the moment you were in serious trouble,” Hermione grudgingly gives him credit.

It sets off another conference. Cedric doesn’t seem to be ceding ground this time.

They’re right about what matters; it would drive Harry mental if spending time with anyone else turned into a drama or a mission to reassure Tom. He couldn’t stand to walk on eggshells, if he never knew what would set him off next. He’d be miserable if Tom used his worries to guilt Harry into playing overly safe. He wants an equal in this kind of relationship – a partner, not a parent. And he has one. Tom drew a line at facing danger alone, but he stepped up instead of holding Harry back.

He glances far down the shore and ducks to hide a smile. Tom should be knee-deep in chilly water and pondweed, but he has pushed it aside in a bubbling waterfall to avoid getting his socks wet. Ridiculous. A realisation settles warm in Harry’s chest; this might be the happiest he has ever been.

The dark clouds on the horizon can’t dampen his mood. Weather is tricky in the mixed climate; he doesn’t know whether to expect a thunderstorm or a blizzard.

Accio. The stones don’t make his pockets feel any heavier. An entire backpack is in there too, after some careful testing. Tom and Krum couldn’t agree whether a bottomless bag in a bottomless pocket would behave like any other object, or whether nesting dimensions would make things explode in exciting new ways. Space magic is strange. It hurts his brain to thinks about it. Time magic, on the other hand, well, that’s much worse.

A time turner is no use for changing the past. It can grant more hours in a day, which could make a big difference if there’s a deadline. Perhaps Tom wanted to ensure they would have enough time to develop the spell before the holidays end? It might’ve been crucial if they hadn’t made a breakthrough, but it hardly seems worth fighting for now. The curses are fully combined and in the last stages of animal testing.

So maybe, instead, Tom’s plan depends on being in two places at once, to take advantage of the extra numbers or the best alibi possible. In

which case… if they didn't use it right away…

Oh. Harry grins slowly. Oh, now *there's* a sneaky idea. He would put money on it being a certain Slytherin's sneaky idea, but they've already bet on it.

"I'd feel better if they'd known each other for more than two months," he overhears Hermione. "Tom is impulsive. It's impossible to tell how committed he is. He could back out just a quickly as he jumped all in."

"Er, no," Cedric says, with the terrible burden of Being Too Perceptive. "No, he's serious. He's really serious."

Harry almost spoils his thoughtful discretion by laughing. There is still a smile in his voice when he cuts in to save the poor bloke, "Even if attraction is fleeting, that's not the bedrock. It all comes back to respect. That's where it started and that's where it'd end."

"I – that is – well." Hermione sighs. "Oh, drat it all, Viktor was right."

The thundering crack of a portkey hits Harry like a punch in the back. He staggers. His ears pop, and beyond the ringing, creatures sound the alarm as they're shaken figuratively or literally out of the trees.

Thestrals and fwoopers clear the forest but pull up at the wards, scouring the dome for an escape route, frantic when there are none to be found.

"Oh, what *now*," Harry mutters, whirling around in the sudden darkness as he casts *protego*. It must be big to cast a shadow that size. A dragon, maybe.

It's bigger.

In fact, it's a rock so big that for a moment it doesn't look like it's falling. It would fit in the quidditch pitch like an egg cup, except it isn't falling into the pitch – it's above the lake.

"Are they *insane!*" Hermione shrieks.

Harry reaches for Tom's mind before he reaches for his wand. He is almost swept away by calculations that turn dimensions and density into kinetic energy and apocalyptic waves. A splash as high as Gryffindor tower upon impact, spreading out, losing energy but not enough as the lake shallows towards the shore. There, waves would build up again, and scour the land clean until the water and logs

smash into the wards, reflect back, and repeat at least a dozen times. Like an unholy mix of a bathtub and a blender. As soon as Tom knows the scope of the problem, he has three different contingencies. Harry doubles them.

But while those ideas marinate. *"Wingardium leviosa!"* he flicks his wand, as further down the bank he feels Tom cast, *"Arresto Momentum!"*

Strategies volley between them faster than thought. There's no point climbing trees, no solid ground will be high enough, and no shield or barrier or ward they can erect would withstand the barrage. Harry could fly over the flood, but there isn't an easy way to get everyone up there. The gamemakers know him too well; he'd be the last to leave.

Flying carpet, flying shirt? – enchantments, too lengthy – call thestrals over – herd panicking, unlikely to come.

Down the shore beside Tom, Krum has his wand up. Cedric and Fleur follow suit. "*Reducio! Wingardium leviosa!*"

"That won't do enough, it's too heavy!" Hermione points out.

Harry does not have time for perfect solutions. "Make it lighter, then!"

Featherlight – a memory – a falcon fast and nimble enough to dodge a griffin while carrying a featherlight backpack – yes!

Out the corner of his eye, Harry sees Krum transform as Tom fills him in.

"Amelia! Get over here now!" Harry shouts as his hand starts to sweat around the wand heating up in his palm. Krum reappears in a blur of feathers and immediately turns to add another levitation spell to the rock. "Gather round a backpack. Jump in if the rock reaches the lake. Krum will carry you, keep you safe."

"What about Riddle?" Cedric asks, white-knuckling his wand.

Riddle is not letting Hogwarts go without a fight. It's home. Harry understands the sentiment entirely. But he'll be dangerously far from the backpack if they fail.

"Stand by," Harry says. "We'll think of something."

The spells are slowing the rock down, though not nearly enough.

Their only recourse left is to reduce the mass – a hell of a lot of mass. To make things worse, they can't just smash it, because one rock or a thousand will make the same splash. But it would make a return portkey only a fraction of the size. If something that large disappears underwater – *cavitation, vacuum collapse, a boiling implosion worse than the first impact* – yeah, best not let it sink intact even if they can slow it enough that it won't cause a tsunami.

Material transformation – rock to iceberg, ice to steam? Not enough time.

Object transfiguration, Tom realises as the numbers fall in place in his mind. Equations flash by faster than he can consciously process them, on intuition and experience alone. He only needs the verdict: difficult. He will be limited to the simplest type of transfiguration, on the order of matchstick-to-needle or hedgehog-to-pincushion, and the spell would last a few minutes at most before reverting to form.

Harry wracks both their imaginations, but there just aren't that many things so large and round. A cloud? Too nebulous, he needs an object. Ideally a light object. Balloons don't get that big. Except for Grindelwald's fancy German airship – bonus – that thing floats!

A plan slots into place in the twists between their minds.

Go! Tom urges, and flicks his wand.

Harry sets off at a dead sprint and by the third step he's airborne, flying to intercept. The rock looms larger and larger until he is alongside, racing it to the ground. When the rock starts to take on a silver sheen, Harry transforms. Hair whips into his eyes, his jacket flaps around him. The twist goes straight to his head; it keeps spinning, trying to make sense of the topsy-turvy world. Natural orientation insists that the earth cannot be sideways, but then there are two types of blue, water and sky, which is which?

The rocky crevasses smooth into a curved metallic sheet as Harry flips into the wind, and it clicks – it's just like quidditch, diving for the snitch. Merlin that lake is coming up awfully fast.

Ready yet? Harry can only see a fraction of the airship, but the transfiguration must be progressing quickly, if only because shiny panels are starting to flash by faster and faster as he falls past it – as it starts to rise.

Wind rushes in his ears but he hears Tom clear as day. *Now!*

“Incendio!” The spell punches through the shell of the airship, into two hundred thousand cubic metres of hydrogen gas. It spits back at him like an angry dragon. *“Protego!”*

He falls past the geyser before it can burn through his shield, but the hole is growing, burning through the material so fast, it’s gaining on him. Harry does not wait around. In another heartbeat he is a bird again, fighting against the updraft as more hydrogen ignites.

Harry pulls out of the dive late enough for the spray to wet his feathers. He only gains enough height not to drown, anything else would be a detour – he is a fluffy homing missile for Tom’s open arms. Water turns to pebbles and grass beneath him. One step, two – collision. Tom spins with the momentum or simply the joy of being alive, and for a moment Harry is swept off his feet, still flying.

“Do I still have eyebrows?” he manages with what little breath hasn’t been squeezed out of him.

“Yes. And eyes,” Tom laughs, beaming with fierce pride. “Look! Look what we did!”

Harry won’t let go so they must turn together to face the fireworks. Emphasis on *fire*.

“Oh, wow.” Half the airship is consumed already, stripped back to a metal frame around a massive fireball, climbing as high as the castle into the sky.

Harry squints. “Did you–? You did!” he grins. “You included his little basket!”

“His palace in the sky. Got to be true to form. You know it’s the details that make or break transfiguration.”

Basket, palace – same difference. It always looked so tiny beneath the behemoth of an airship that it hardly seemed to matter. Which is likely not the feeling the Minister wanted to inspire, lording over them, but Harry can’t help that novelty has long worn off after seeing it in the Prophet every other month. No doubt, when Grindelwald was young, and the technology never-before-seen, it was awestriking. Flying without magic – who’d have thought! And the sheer unrivalled size is intimidating no matter how often Harry sees it. Or, it was. He is struggling to take it seriously now that he can see how fast it could tear itself apart.

“I reckon the Germans will have to find another way to curry favour,” Harry says. “I doubt Grindelwald will be in a hurry to get in his airship after this.”

The frame splits. Metal screams and groans. It’s not half as loud as Hermione and Fleur, jumping and cheering. The front half drops into the lake, joining the rest quickly sinking beneath the surface. The hissing splash peters out long before it reaches the shore.

“Shame,” Tom says. “It could spice up those parades.”

Harry cackles. He can picture it, sitting through another tedious procession, while in their own little world the snobs disapparate covered in canapés and champagne and smelling of smoke.

“I wouldn’t be sad to see it go. Merlin, no, the sad part is watching an old man feel the need to overshadow his own parades.” Or make every parade about himself in the first place. It points to bloated insecurity more than ego.

“Bit pathetic, really,” Tom agrees.

The last bit of airship frame above the water warps back to stone and crumbles. Presumably the rest does too, but the bulk of the rock volume was atomised. If any burnt or unburnt hydrogen transforms, the particles are too small and spread out to even make a visible dust cloud.

It’s gone. A symbol of Grindelwald’s reign turned from ashes to dust in seconds.

Glorious. Tom is so satisfied that Harry blushes on some sort of conditioned reflex. *We could not have arranged a better turnabout in messaging if we’d planned it.*

Turnabout indeed. The Ministry have never leveraged such disproportionate force against anyone before. That was not a murder attempt – it was a foregone conclusion. But then, Harry can’t think of anyone who managed to bamboozle the High Inquisitor and embarrass the regime more publicly. And that was *before* they survived the most blatant ‘fuck you’ in the history of magical transportation.

They’ve really put a damper in that ‘we can squish any hint of rebellion’ warning to the masses. Harry beams. *We might drive Grindelwald to keel over from an aneurism at this rate. What do you reckon is the chance that’s what the prophecy meant?*

Tom snorts a laugh into Harry's shoulder. *Greater than zero.*

So you're saying its possible. Harry smells a challenge. "Ah, well. That was a step up from the hydra at least." He rubs his hands together briskly. "What's next?"

He really can't imagine. What could possibly spell utter annihilation more than an asteroid?

"I wouldn't get your hopes up. That might be the best they can do." The electric excitement roiling through Tom's mind belies his tone. *I'm sure of it. They've done their worst and only have egg on their face to show for it. This is it – this is the moment they finally authorise the time turner.*

"Really, their best? At least Bellatrix drew blood."

And now they'll give her the biggest leg up they can find. "I –"

Tom stop. He turns.

Harry steps up to his shoulder. It's the tree line – dark shapes in the shadows. Bodies set in tense, angry angles.

Harry squints.

Centaurs. At least a dozen, bows in hand. It's almost as alarming as the sudden tension in the muscles beside him.

"I don't suppose they're here for the opportunity to observe an astral body up close," Harry murmurs.

Tom smiles grimly. "They're considering how to prevent the Ministry destroying their land and lives."

And the fastest way would be to give Grindelwald exactly what he wants: slaughter. It only remains to be seen whether it will overcome the centaurs' distaste in participating in wizarding games.

"Will they attack?"

"They might."

Amelia shakes Fleur's shoulder, points urgently, and the celebrations fall silent. Wands rise.

For a moment, no one moves. Harry doesn't know if any spell would provoke them. Instead of casting, he holds a shield on the tip of his

tongue. Arrows would come first, he expects, and then they'd charge. The alliance is downhill, backed against the lake. He doesn't like how vulnerable it leaves them.

"I healed one of your own, so listen to me now!" Tom calls, wand tip to his throat. His voice projects far further than it should.

The centaurs don't give any indication that they heard him.

Harry knows they did, because Tom knows it. He feels their minds, the fury and fear, and he starts to push.

"If you must address the threat to your home and herd, address it to those who threatened you – take it to the Ministry officials sitting safe in Hogsmeade. Those who came for front row seats while they try to make all of us suffer!"

A gentle nudge at first, testing their response, then a shove when the consensus moves in the right way, until the feelings are redirected. It helps that their new targets didn't just vaporise a small portion of a mountain.

Call it returning a favour, Tom thinks, flush with victory.

The angry one, Bane, stomps a hoof. Heads turn – many more heads than Harry could see while they held still in the shadows.

As one, the centaurs turn away.

You cunning bastard, Harry realises. That's one way to get more aurors out of the Ministry. The castle wards won't be raised to keep the centaurs in forever.

Not a bad outcome. Saved me a trip into their territory. The last tail disappears, and Tom finally relaxes.

Merlin forbid a coup take more effort than necessary. Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.

At this rate, Harry will never stop smiling.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe we got to 270k words before Riddle hunted people down for a spot of murder.

Something I learnt this chapter: a quidditch pitch is ~150m long.

The Hindenburg was 245m. Holy hell zeppelins were big. The entire thing burned in less than 1 minute. Also, burning that much hydrogen produces enough water vapour to seed a cloud, and I am not the first person to ask that question.

A 150m rock is nothing like a 150m asteroid because it wouldn't have time to reach terminal velocity let alone orbital velocity, and speed makes a huge difference to energy. The portkey started stationary, so it had less energy than a 5m asteroid, which if it didn't burn up in the atmosphere would knock over all trees and houses within a few hundred metres or cause a tsunami only up to 1km away. So it's not very bad if we're measuring by asteroid standards. On the other hand, the Ministry basically dropped the energy equivalent of half nuclear bomb on them. No wonder you need a license to make portkeys.

A few weeks ago…
Regulus: fuck, my kid just got selected to complete in a tournament that I'm rigging for a murder demon. Fucking fuckity fuck. If I pull my support that won't stop Riddle. Best I can do is some Serious Conditions, or maybe I can undermine him –
Regulus: Wait. Wait a minute. If they knew each other they'd get on like a house on fire.
Regulus: Hey, Riddle, fyi there's something very interesting going on in the duelling room.
Tom: 0.o
Harry: How the hell is Riddle so Johhny-on-the-spot literally all the time??
Regulus: :)
Regulus: Fourth floor, west corridor. Don't ask him about shield charms, he could talk for hours.
Tom: … I know what you're doing and I'm not even mad.
Regulus: >:)
Tom: How about protego, such an overrated charm.
Harry: Now you listen here!
Then a few weeks later when Tom catches up with the oh-no-I-have-to-keep-him program, Regulus is standing next to a gaggle of sleeper agents and blackmailed officials twiddling his thumbs like 'how did that get there? It's just the darndest thing. But how convenient.'
And that's the story of how Regulus got his kid the best protection available to man or god.

End Notes

The title is from a poem by Edmund Vance Cooke called 'How did you die?'

Did you tackle that trouble that came your way
With a resolute heart and cheerful?
Or hide your face from the light of day
With a craven soul and fearful?

Oh, a trouble's a ton, or a trouble's an ounce,
Or a trouble is what you make it,
And it isn't the fact that you're hurt that counts,
But only how did you take it?

You are beaten to earth? Well, well, what's that!
Come up with a smiling face.
It's nothing against you to fall down flat,
But to lie there--that's disgrace.

The harder you're thrown, why the higher you bounce
Be proud of your blackened eye!
It isn't the fact that you're licked that counts;
It's how did you fight--and why?

And though you be done to the death, what then?
If you battled the best you could,
If you played your part in the world of men,
Why, the Critic will call it good.

Death comes with a crawl, or comes with a pounce,
And whether he's slow or spry,
It isn't the fact that you're dead that counts,
But only how did you die?

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